

羊太郎

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6



ファンタジア文庫

6



アカシックレコード
禁書教典

ロクでなし魔術講師と

Akashic records
of bastard magic instructor



"HEY! TEACHER...
IF THAT'S THE CASE, PLEASE LET ME JOIN!"

TERESA REIDY

A STUDENT IN GLENN'S CLASS.
HAVING GROWN UP IN A MERCHANT'S
HOUSE, SHE HAS AN ASSERTIVE
PERSONALITY. ACTS AS THE 'BIG
SISTER' FIGURE IN GLENN'S CLASS.

"AH... TEACHER, I'M ME AS WELL."

"I REALLY DON'T KNOW
WHAT TO DO WITH YOU..."

"UUU... AHH... UUU... AHH..."

SISTINE CAN'T SEEM TO BE HONEST WITH HERSELF
AND VOLUNTEER...

SISTINE FIBEL

A SERIOUS AND BRILLIANT STUDENT.
VERY INTERESTED IN JOINING THE
EXPEDITION, BUT WILL IT BRING HER
ONE STEP CLOSER TO HER LIFELONG
DREAM...?

LUMIA LET OUT A PAINED SMILE FROM BEHIND, AND USING HAND SIGNALS TO HINT
AT SISTINE'S TRUE DESIRES, AND THEN LOWERED HER HEAD IN REQUEST FOR GLENN.

"YOU GUYS ARE ALWAYS COOPED UP INSIDE THE CLASSROOM...
...ARE YOU SATISFIED WITH SUCH A BORING EDUCATION?"
TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH,
...I WAS SECRETLY PLANNING TO BEND THE RULES A LITTLE
...AND TAKE SOME OF YOU ON THE EXPEDITION WITH ME!"

GLENN RADARS

A MAGIC TEACHER THAT HATES MAGIC.
TO AVOID GETTING FIRED, HE PERSONALLY
HEADS AN EXPEDITION, BUT ATTEMPTS
TO USE HIS STUDENTS AS A MEANS TO
CUT DOWN ON EXPENSES.

LUMIA TINGEL

AN ELEGANT AND KIND GIRL CARRYING A TERRIBLE SECRET. BEST FRIEND TO SISTINE, AND TRUSTED BY GLENN. INCIDENTALLY, SHE HAS THE LARGEST BREASTS OF THE THREE.

"FEELS GREAT."

RIEL RAYFORD

GLENN'S EX-PARTNER. LUMIA'S CLASSMATE AND BODYGUARD. SHE USUALLY DOESN'T SHOW MUCH EMOTIONS, BUT SEEMED TO BE PARTICULARLY EXCITED ABOUT THE HOT SPRINGS.

"UWAAA...
AS I EXPECTED, THIS HOT SPRING IS TOO GOOD..."

"MM... VERY WARM..."

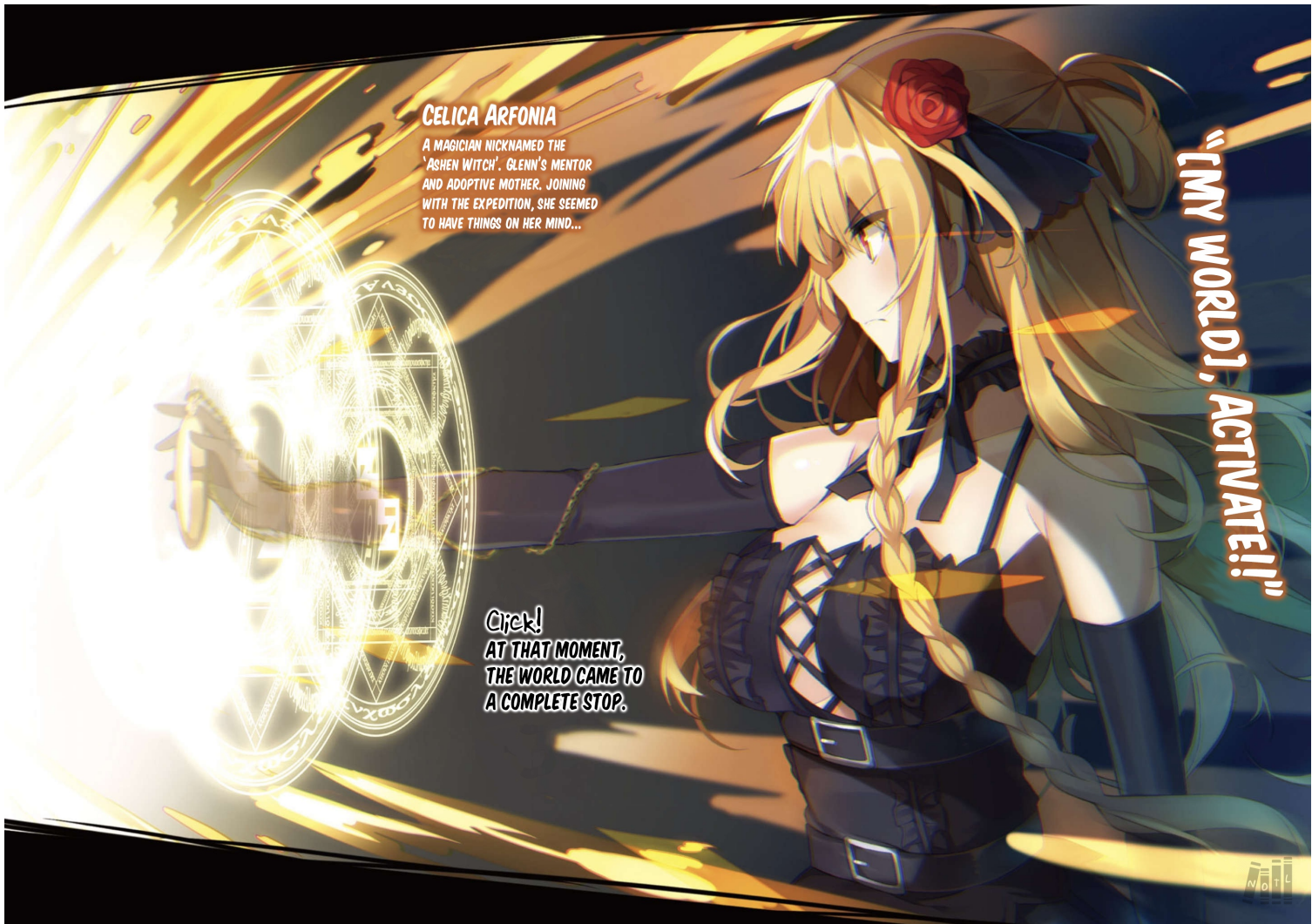


CELICA ARFONIA

A MAGICIAN NICKNAMED THE
'ASHEN WITCH'. GLENN'S MENTOR
AND ADOPTIVE MOTHER. JOINING
WITH THE EXPEDITION, SHE SEEMED
TO HAVE THINGS ON HER MIND...

"[MY WORLD], ACTIVATE!!"

Click!
AT THAT MOMENT,
THE WORLD CAME TO
A COMPLETE STOP.



NAMENLOSE

A YOUNG GIRL WITH BIZARRE WINGS.
SHE HAS A SOMBER AIR SURROUNDING
HER, AND AN APPEARANCE RESEMBLING
A CERTAIN SOMEONE...

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Prologue: Heavens (Celica)

"Return thyself to the cycle of providence..."

The girl swiftly uttered the incantation as an unfathomable amount of magic power circled her.

"Now, disappear from my sight!"

Modified Black Magic [Extinction•Ray].

The girl raised her left hand as a blinding ray of light shot out from her palm, gushing forth like an unstoppable torrent down the corridor. It was a spell that can break down matter to its basic constituent. All the enemy that stood before her - the countless puppets of the ancient sorcerers charging at her in close formation - was wiped out by the spell in the blink of the eye.

Yet, the girl did not seem to relax nor savor her victory.

"Haa... Haa... Haa..."

The girl, Celica Arfonia, leaned on the wall of the corridor in excruciating pain.

It was the 44th floor of Alzano Imperial Magic Academy's Underground Labyrinth.

In the unending darkness, the flickering light of the lamp meekly illuminated the silhouette of Celica that one can only be described as pitiful.

Her body was covered with wounds large and small, her blood-soaked clothes in tatters, and her breathing weak and sporadic. Nowhere to be seen was the confident and beautiful woman.

"Haa... Ugh... And here I t-thought... t-this time... I would be a-able

to...!"

The permission to explore the Alzano Imperial Magic Academy's Underground Labyrinth - such was the undisputed reason for the continent's greatest magician, Celica, to serve as a professor.

Over the years, she has devoted most of her effort to conquering the Underground Labyrinth. Yet, despite her perfect preparation, and utilizing every trick she could muster, her attempt this time once again ended in failure. Celica could only meekly swallow this painful truth.

Another pointless endeavor.

The magic tool in the shape of a pocket watch, and the slender sword on her waist - items that brought forth Celica's full ability as a magician... Items that spoke to the unspeakable lengths she went to conquer the Labyrinth.

Yet despite giving it her all, the day that the Labyrinth could be cleared still existed far beyond the horizon.

Celica was certainly a magician of unparalleled strength, but the winding Labyrinth was superior to even her abilities, where she felt the countless traps that stood in her way seemingly ridiculed her.

"Darn it... The pain..."

Celica angrily cursed at the Labyrinth. She was unable to heal her own wounds with magic, relying only on medicinal herbs held in place with bandages to provide temporary relief. Her body has long gone past the healing limit.

It was a limit that occurred from repeated healing spells within a short time frame. With repeated use, the effectiveness of the heal decreases, to the point that the use of healing spell would instead cause damage to the body. So much was this phenomenon feared, that 'Death by Healing' was greatly dreaded by soldiers on the field of war...

As of such, the fear of death gripped the veteran Celica's heart.

It's already impossible... It's time to withdraw... It's time to go back...

Such logical thoughts cycled themselves in the minds of Celica.

However...

"Hahaha... Isn't this perfect? Haven't I always been seeking a good death?"

Celica gently lifted her head, revealing a self-deprecating smile.

"Ugh... Fighting with the demon-worshipping cultists... dueling with mages... none of that was unable to end me...! Isn't this a perfect chance...?!"

What was the source of her unwavering desire, to overpower her usual calm judgment?

Even at the brink of death, Celica continued her ceaseless march forward. Even when every fiber of her being screamed at her that such a choice will only lead her to her meaningless death, she willingly ventured forth.

"Forward! Toward your destiny!"

In her mind, the voice kept beckoning as she took step after step down the corridor... As if a marionette, she slowly wobbled forward.

"...Yes. I... m-must... c-continue on...! O-otherwise, I... w-will... a-always..."

"Fine. But promise me you will safely return... I beg of you."

Suddenly, a familiar voice surfaced in her dulled mind. This new voice overpowered the other, reaching the depth of her soul.

"...!"

At that point, Celica's march toward her own death stopped as light returned to her eyes.

Her mind slowly cooled down and logic returned to her once more, while the beckoning voice was temporarily banished from

her thoughts.

After a moment of pause...

"S-silly me... A-am I not getting my priorities mixed up...?"

After Celica uttered the words through her quivering lips, she turned her body around.

"Darn it..."

As she cursed at her failure, she unsteadily dragged herself away... now tormented by yet another failure.

In the end...

Celica never noticed...

"...Celica."

A presence watched Celica as she departed...

From the moment Celica first stepped into the Labyrinth, this presence would always follow her from behind, constantly watching her.

Celica, once again, failed to notice.



Chapter 1: Teacher goes on an Archaeological Expedition

I have... returned.

Returned to these calm, peaceful, mundane, and slightly lethargic days...

Granted, nothing interesting ever happens in these days, but it is precisely the reason why I find these days especially precious.

Initially, I did not see myself deserving of such a life. I refused to acknowledge it, and alienated myself from it.

But, a certain student pulled me from my withdrawn state, and returned me to this bright and colorful world...

Perhaps... I can... stay in this world...?

She told me I could continue to enjoy this peaceful and calm days.

What should I do for the one who allowed me to remain in this bountiful world? What could I possibly do to repay her?

As I repeatedly thought of this debt - a certain incident occurred.

"Glenn-kun... You... will be fired." Headmaster Rick suddenly declared.

"Huh? Huuuh?!"

Glenn's surprised voice echoed throughout the Alzano Imperial Magic Academy headmaster's office.

"Hey, just a moment, what is this all about?"

Glenn nervously slammed both hands on the headmaster's desk

and leaned his body forward.

"I do not recall doing something that would warrant me getting fired... probably... no, definitely not!"

"We will discuss later why you can't seem to confidently deny it..." Headmaster Rick calmly replied, "What I just said earlier isn't completely accurate, so let me correct it."

"...Not accurate?"

"Yes, it's more accurate to say, 'You will be fired if it keeps going on like this'."

"T-then, why is it...?"

"Seriously? Are you an idiot? I always knew you aren't the brightest bulb, but I never thought you would be this big an idiot, Glenn..."

While leaning on the nearby wall, Celica interjected into the conversation.

Her anger clearly visible on her beautiful but distorted face, with veins bulging on her forehead from the rage.

The injury that Celica suffered from the recent expedition down into the Underground Labyrinth has yet to fully heal. Her slender build was wrapped in bandages, and her left arm held in a sling.

Such a pitiful view seemed mismatched from her usual aloof attitude.

"Glenn... Have you submitted your thesis on magic? Surely you know that the deadline for submission has long since passed..."

Despite her pitiful appearance, Celica's piercing words and cold glare exerted considerable pressure on Glenn.

"Ah... Thesis on magic...?"

Glenn face warped at the realization, nervously blinking his eyes.

"...I see, that... Umm... Is it really necessary to write one?"

"Ob-vi-ous-ly! You big idiot!' Ahaha~"

Suddenly, sparks of flame burst forth as Celica blew Glenn up with a spell.



"You are a teacher of the academy! It should be painfully clear that you needed to periodically report your research progress with a thesis!"

Celica dragged the burnt Glenn by his collar and shouted at him.

"Ugh... W-what the heck, I'm sure this is the first that I heard about it...!"

"At least read the job requirements! You dumb kid!"

After a period of intense shaking, Glenn's head just meekly drooped down.

"From your reply, I presume you didn't even bother to do any research for the thesis?"

The headmaster looked directly at Glenn.

"...M-mmn."

"One of the conditions for the extended employment of a teacher is to periodically submit a thesis to report their research progress. It's part of the academy's operational rules. It is different from that time in which I took you on as a teacher despite your lack of a resume. On this matter, I can't help you even if I want to!"

The headmaster let out a difficult sigh.

"Celica, I just thought of a great idea, why not just let me get laid off and go back to being a moocher...?"

"Rejected, you idiot!"

Celica mercilessly kicked down the wisecrack who still dared to joke.

"Ouch... Either way, I guess I should avoid joking about it."

Glenn wobbly stood back up, and turned to face the headmaster.

"Is there no way to fix this, headmaster? I know I am not qualified to say this, but I hope to be a teacher for a while longer... at least

until those kids graduate..."

"...Hmm? G-Glenn... You...?"

Glenn's serious visage brought about a surprise from Celica. In no way has she ever expected such words to come out of Glenn.

"Uhh..."

Glenn's demeanor also surprised the headmaster, who let the room descend into silence as he was unsure how to respond.

"Is there any possibility to see that the thesis deadline extended? I will certainly write one... I beg of you! Please give me the chance!"

Glenn begged with his head lowered.

Daaarn it...!!! I can't let myself get fired...!!!

At that moment, in his mind, Glenn was set upon by a novel fear.

It will seriously be bad if I get fired now! Just a while ago, I secretly used Celica's name to shop by mail, with everything to be paid in installments. I won't be able to pay for it if I am no longer getting paid!

That item was a magic doppelgänger puppet.

The plan was a simple one: Have the puppet take his appearance, and teach the class in his stead, so that he can skip work.

Glenn seemingly had grown, but at the same time, remained the same as always.

'Until those kids graduate'. Such words came out spontaneously, perhaps reflective of his changed inner thoughts, but it seems the path was still long before he completely become a respectable individual.

Darn it, because of problems with my own credit, I had to use Celica's name, and selected 'no returns' for the lower price. This time I'm screwed! I cannot be without a job until the money is paid!

Or more accurately, I'm screwed if Celica ends up finding out about it if I am derelict with my payments!

With such troubled thoughts...

"I beg of you! Headmaster!"

Glenn used all his efforts to perform the perfect dogeza.

"You speak of writing a thesis, but do you even have anything to write it on? Just reviewing a few literatures won't suffice you know..."

"T-that's..."

"Certainly, it's hard to limit the progress of magic research to strict deadlines. So, while the deadlines are set, there is always some flexibility, and can be extended for quite some time. But if you have nothing to write your thesis on, any extension is moot."

Glenn revealed a pained expression. Certainly, without any research to build a thesis and just rely purely on citing literatures won't make the cut before the close scrutiny of the reviewers.

S-so... am I really doomed? How could I possibly explain to those kids...?

Before the fear of not being able to meet his payments, his first feelings were of regret to his students.

"Although... Hmm... Glenn, you are in luck." The headmaster spoke with a smile, "Have you heard of 'Taum Observatory' before?"

"...? Umm... Isn't it an ancient ruins in the northern regions...?"

Unsure of the headmaster's intentions, Glenn racked his brain for the relevant details.

"Yes, as you may be aware, the site's difficulty is rated as 'F'. The site lacks any significant sorcerous relics, the spirit veins are also quite lackluster. Neither the magical nor the archaeological value is anything worth mentioning. If it weren't for its inaccessible

location, it would probably have long been turned into a tourist attraction..." After a moment's pause, headmaster Rick then continued in a stern voice, "However, a few years ago, certain magician's research of the 'Taum Observatory' proposed the site as the ritual ground for spatial-temporal magic."

"...Ah?! Really?!" Glenn responded in surprise, "Are those not just unfounded rumors? Hasn't 'Taum Observatory' been repeatedly investigated already...? T-that, and something as absurd as time travel is..."

Spatial-temporal magic. To anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of magic, such talks were nothing but hogwash.

The time and space were intricately linked, where the time flow within a space could not be cut off from the rest, such was the law of the world. As of such, one could speed up and slow down time in a space, or teleport and distort the space with the progression of time - Granted, the difficulty of such spells was immense. But to separate both space and time from its natural flow - 'time travel' was deemed theoretically impossible. Such was one of the two greatest laws governing magic, 'The Law of Internal Validity', which stated that the world would naturally correct itself to its most stable state, and would never permit any challenge to the natural order.

"But... The magician who posited such a theory was a famed genius, so much so that we cannot simply disregard it as madness."

The headmaster revealed a pained smile, and let out a long sigh.

"Just as Glenn-kun said, 'Taum Observatory' has been repeatedly investigated, and the results are without any promise. As of such, no self-respecting researcher is willing to take up the task. That and, everyone is busy with their own research projects to have the spare time for such a fool's errand. But, since the genius magician brought up such a theory, we cannot simply ignore it. So at the very least, a repeat expedition is necessary..."

The headmaster gazed at Glenn with deepening intent.

"We have left the site untouched for quite some time. Don't you think it is about time to dispatch someone to check it out again?"

"Headmaster... could it be that you are asking...?"

"Glenn-kun, I wish for you to lead the expedition to 'Taum Observatory.' If by odd chance you are able to discover evidence of spatial-temporal magic, your name will be forever left in the annals of discovery. That and 'finding no evidence' is also a valid result given the circumstances, and if you write it into a thesis... Haa... While those reviewers may laugh at it, at the very least they will let you continue on with your position... How does that sound?"

It was a lifeline for Glenn.

Glenn leaned forward and gratefully gripped the headmaster's hands, then, said with the utmost confidence.

"Headmaster...! I understand! Please, just leave it to me!"

As he expressed his gratitude, within Glenn's heart...

Ugh... So troublesome...

Glenn resisted the deep desire to shout in frustration.

Research expedition?! For someone who enjoys relaxing at home, isn't this just a form of torture?! Why must I do something this troublesome, are there no easier alternatives...?!

...Glenn still failed to mature even the slightest.

And what is this joke about spatial-temporal magic? Such outlandish tales, how could it possibly motivate anyone as a path to fame? If the headmaster mentioned treasures hidden away, then maybe...!

Unaware of the internal conflicts within Glenn, the headmaster then dropped a bombshell.

"However, I must regrettably inform you... as far as the expedition is concerned, the academy will be unable to reimburse you for your expenses. Glenn-kun, you must cover the expenses out of your

own pocket. This is because the fund allocation has already finished for the year, even if we make an exception, by the time the funds have been approved, there will be negligible time for you to write your thesis."

W-what the heck...?! I must pay out of my own pocket?!

Within his heart, Glenn was beyond surprised at such a revelation.

"N-no problem! I have been a teacher for some time after all! I should be fine with the savings I have built up."

Glenn forcibly suppressed his nervousness, and replied with a faked confidence.

Ugh! My stomach is churning again! To have to self-fund an expedition is too much! I n-need to think of something... I'm going to be screwed if I carry on this expedition as normal, especially with how little I have left after repeated salary cuts.

At the edge of the proverbial cliff, Glenn suddenly had a thought,

T-that's right...! As long as I bring some students along, I can skimp on the hiring fee for expedition members! This way, I will be able to avoid any personnel expenditure...! Hehehe~!

A complete human trash.

If I remember correctly, any site rated D or above is prohibited for academy students... B-but! Conveniently, 'Taum Observatory' is F-ranked! The lowest possible rank! It is a trash site that could not even be used for the student's 'Archaeology Practicum'! Everything is perfect!

With little change to his facial expression, the devious plans continued to evolve...

I only need to trick the students, and make them labor away at the site... all for the sake of my continued employment... and for the sake of my salary!

At the same time Glenn refined his plan and let out a conniving smile in his heart...

"Glenn!"

Celica approached Glenn with a stern face.

Ah? Celica?! C-could it be that s-she sensed my intentions...?!

Glenn did his best to suppress his nervousness and prevent the colors draining from his face.

But, Celica's serious expression relaxed and turned into a smile, with tears that soon followed...

"To not even worry about the costs, all for the sake of your students... T-that's good... You've really grown..."

Celica brushed away the tears at the corner of her eyes. Her expression of joy so much removed from her usual cold visage... almost as if the person in front of Glenn was a different person.

"...Ah? Uhh... Mm."

The surprised Glenn was at a loss on how to respond.

"Hohoho~ Celica-kun has always been worried about you." The headmaster happily said, "I am not aware of the details, but I've heard that you experienced some rough times in the past. Times that made you disillusioned with the future. Celica-kun has always been worried about you, even after you took the position as a substitute teacher."

"H-headmaster?!"

Celica's face turned beet red, retorted with a tinge of anger to camouflage her embarrassment.

"C-can we not talk about it in front of Glenn?! D-don't be mean! Unfair!"

"Ahaha, sorry I let it slip..."

Ugh... The stinging pain from my bad conscience...

Glenn profusely sweated as his heart ached at the revelation.

"Well then, I guess the matter is settled..."

Either way, I need to get away from Celica as soon as possible.

"J-just leave the repeat expedition of Taum Observatory t-to me! I n-need to get the preparations in order, till then..."

"Glenn."

Just as Glenn was about to step out of the office, he was stopped by Celica.

"...Good luck."

"Mm, thank you."

After a confident reply, Glenn departed from the headmaster's office.



After encouraging her terrible disciple, Celica thought to herself as she strolled in the academy hallways.

"That's right. People can change..."

Within Celica's mind, she recalled the days a year ago, when Glenn had just lost his emotional support - the self-deprecating and emotionless Glenn.

The encouragement she showered him and the magic she taught him led to the tragedy, and resulted in Glenn's ruin. 'Glenn may never recover, perhaps for as long as he lives' - such thoughts tormented Celica, for which she shed countless tears.

But the reality was not pitilessly cruel.

Thankfully, Glenn seemingly had recovered from his trauma, albeit it took quite some time.

While Glenn certainly has acted suspiciously when he accepted the job, he has seen significant improvement compared to himself one year ago. At the minimum, he was no longer the 'empty shell'

he once was.

Although he faced hardship, he did not become discouraged. Although he struggled with his day to day life, his eyes remained looking toward the future.

"Hmph... But still, for me to say this now..."

Celica revealed a bitter smile.

People change.

For the immortal Celica, it was a painful realization.

Yes, humans constantly change, for better or for worse. As they live, they make mistakes, they hesitate, and they encounter hardship. Nonetheless, they grow, and they change.

Guile, ignorance, and misfortune were all facets of what it meant to be human.

For Celica, whose own time has stagnated since the very beginning, the very concept of change was foreign to her...

"Ah... Here it comes again."

A sense of anxiety and worry washed over Celica, as if having a scythe dangling inches above her neck. Her breathing became a struggle, her ears ringed, her heart raced, her legs weakened, and her focus blurred.

"D-darn it... Ugh..."

Celica propped her body up against the wall with her injured hand, and pressed her palm against her head with the other.

Times and times again such attacks would come. This was Celica's 'ailment' - one not of the flesh, but of the mind. Although Celica was well aware of the cause, she knows no way to resolve it. As of late, the frequency of the episodes has worsened, roughly around when Glenn took on the mantle of the teacher, and once again returned to the path of life.

"..."

For the moments that followed, Celica did not move, and only repeatedly took deep breaths, as if waiting for the storm to pass... until finally, peace returned and Celica raised her head once more.

"Taum Observatory, was it...?" In the deserted hallway, Celica muttered under her breath.



The following day.

Alzano Imperial Medical Academy, Class 202.

"Haa..."

Unlike the other students noisily chatting away before the start of class, Sistine wearily stretched her out on the desk and let out a long and audible sigh. Her smooth long platinum hair spread upon the table, as if a glistening river.

"Sisti, please don't feel dejected, I'm sure there will be other opportunities..."

Lumia, sitting next to Sistine, tried to comfort her.

"Mm... I understand... But even so, it is still hard to accept..."

Sistine slowly lifted her face, without an ounce of her usual aloofness. If one have to describe, it would be an air of utter dejection.

"Lumia, what is wrong with Sisti? She looks out of it." Riel, who sat behind them, quietly asked.

"Uhh, a little of this, and a little of that..."

Lumia was unsure how to properly respond, and just went with a pained smile. Sistine, on the other hand, continued to silently mutter to herself.

"I worked my arms off writing that essay to apply as a member of

the expedition, the minimum they should do is to at least be gentle with their words... Are they purposely making fun of me? That and..."

"Don't worry too much..."

Lumia could only do her best to calm the fuming yet disappointed Sistine.

Although, Sistine's anger is not without reason.

It all started with Professor Rufi Fosil's desire to field an expedition to the newly found ruins in the eastern regions of the empire, and began to gather research assistants from among the students.

With her strong desire to follow in the footsteps of her late grandfather, Redolf Fibel, who was a renowned expert in archaeothaumatology, Sistine eagerly applied for the position in hopes to garner experience in the field.

However, her application was quickly rejected. 'Female, too young, too low of a grade, too low of a magician rank, too opinionated' and so forth, they picked at Sistine of her various inadequacies. Even the essay that was to be evaluated as part of the application was discarded to the side.

"What the heck! Isn't there supposed to be gender equality among magicians? And what was 'too opinionated' supposed to mean!"

Sistine's anger welled up whenever she remember the contemptuous response Professor Fosil gave.

"Haa... Either way, counting this time, I've failed to get accepted on an expedition for four times now... How discouraging..."

Not just this time, Sistine has applied every time there was an expedition, yet every time she failed to get accepted.

"But Sisti, some of the points they brought up were quite valid. As far as your magician rank was concerned, it is, after all, only the

second ra-..."

Lumia abruptly stopped at the sight of Sistine's furrowed eyebrows.

"B-but, Sisti is the top student of our grade, compared to the other second year students, Sistine is already so amazing. Even I am just a first rank. That and, from what I recall, don't research expeditions usually require members to be at least above the third rank?"

"Mm... That... is certainly true..."

"Furthermore, wasn't that site's difficulty rated as B++?"

Difficulty rating was set by taking into account a combined factor of the site's traps, mechanisms, guardians, beasts, and regional conditions. They were set into one of the seven broad category of S, A, B, C, D, E, and F, and subsequently divided into 21 more specific ranks. A rank of B++ signified a risk of death even for professional expedition members with ample preparation.

"It may be better if you didn't go. I would be worried if you were to embark on such a dangerous expedition."

"Uuu..."

It was difficult for Sistine to argue against the magician rank and site difficulty.

While magician rank was not a strict representation of one's ability, by and large Lumia was correct. The same could be said about the site's difficulty. Just calmly evaluating her own capability for a slight moment was enough to recognize herself as inadequate.

With Lumia's verbal jabs, Sistine puffed her cheeks in meaningless protest.

The childish behavior of her best friend made Lumia unable to do anything but wryly smile.

"Do not worry. With how hard Sisti is working, I'm sure one day you

will be properly recognized and accepted into an expedition."

"...T-thanks, Lumia."

With Lumia's gentle encouragement, a slight smile returned to Sistine's face.

"Haa... Everyone, good morning!"

Glenn threw open the classroom door, and confidently marched to his desk. Unlike his usual lazy appearance, today he was strangely energized.

At the same time, the bell rung, signaling the start of class, and the side conversations slowly died down.

"Umm... Before we start, I have an announcement to make."
Glenn excitedly declared at the podium.

Something is up...

Such feelings caused all the students to stare intently at Glenn.

"You guys are always cooped up inside the classroom, studying the material from the textbooks, and memorizing those esoteric facts... Is that really good? Are you satisfied with such a boring education?"

Glenn's sudden outburst startled the students, and whispers began to pop up left and right within the classroom.

"You are all magicians seeking the 'truth of the world', right? Sure, there is plenty of knowledge to be had within the books, but this world cannot be contained within mere lines of words. It's a world filled with many wonders just waiting to be explored! If you do not yearn after these wonders, what make of magicians are you?! What sort of truth-seeker are you?!"

Bam! Glenn swung his hand at the table, and continued his torrent of words.

"You should spend more time learning about the world and expand your horizons! After all, you are still all too young. If you

keep yourself cooped up in your rooms, you will become more and more detached from the world! You must step out of your comfort zone and experience the outside world! Discover the unknown and grow your experiences! After all, new discoveries are always just around the corner, and you should expand your understanding of the great world we all live in! Don't you all agree?"

"I... really want you all to experience what this world has to offer. To forge you all into splendid magicians who is well versed in all manners of discipline, truly worldly existences. To make your futures brighter and full of hope!"

Glenn's arousing speech created a fervor of excitement within the classroom.

"...Because of these beliefs, when the headmaster requested me to head an archaeological expedition. I immediately accepted given my desire to contribute to the magic community. To tell you the truth, I was secretly planning to bend the rules a little and take some of you on the expedition with me!"

The fervor continued to grow among the students.

"Together, let us venture out to the great outdoors, explore the ancient wonders, experience its greatness, expand the understanding of magic, and achieve new heights!"

Glenn's words had a portion of truth to them.

A first-rate magician must not only be well-versed of spells, but also needs broad knowledge of the world. Such reason is why magicians are also frequently referred to as 'Sage'.

As of such, the students are unable to refute Glenn's arguments, and passively absorbed his words.

"The ruins I was tasked to explore this time around is that famous 'Taum Observatory'."

"T-Taum Observatory...?!"

Suddenly, Sistine leapt up at the mention of the ruins.

"Huh? White Cat? What's the matter?"

"Ah... N-nothing... Nothing at all..."

After being focused on by the gazes of the entire class, Sistine shirked back into her seat with a reddened face.

"...? Ah, either way, I was hoping to select some students in this class as members of the expedition. Sadly, I couldn't bring too many, as I won't be able to manage too big a group on my own. At most, I can accommodate up to eight members. There is nothing more I can do, I hope everyone can understand..."

Glenn's words riled up the entire class into discussion.

"That's great, Sisti! For an opportunity to come by so soon!" Lumia joyously spoke to the nearby Sistine.

"The difficulty rank is also quite low... It is a perfect opportunity for Sisti, who currently lack experience!"

"Y-yeah... Although all this sounded somewhat suspicious, it certainly is an opportunity...!"

Although she was unaware of Glenn's intentions for riling everyone up, both of her eyes beamed with the desire to participate.

"...Now, who wants to participate in this expedition and make a name for yourselves? It is an opportunity of a lifetime, and its first come, first serve!"

Just moments before Glenn's remarks made Sistine reflexively raised her hands.

"Hmph... The teacher is being silly as always."

The glassed youth stood up as he flashed a sarcastic smile. It was Gibul Wisdan, one of the students in Glenn's class.

"Why would you even want to recruit members from our class?"

We are just regular students. Why not seek your members from those fourth graders with at least the third magician rank, or some of the graduate students? If I am not mistaken, expedition members requires a minimum of the third magician rank to participate."

Although there were thorns in Gibul's words, he nevertheless raised a valid point.

"Ugh, you... Do you know how much an able third-ranked magician costs to recru-? Ah crud..."

Glenn quickly stopped his tongue after letting slip the real answer to Gibul's question.

"I-I mean... Taum Observatory is nothing more than an F-ranked site! As I have said earlier, it is a rare opportunity to find such a lowly rated site, so I was hoping to bring you guys along to expand your horizons!!" Glenn nervously reiterated his unconvincing excuses, almost as if to cover for his earlier slip. "Yes, that right! This kind and caring teacher only wishes to give his beloved pupils the chance for an 'Archaeology Practicum'... Yes, it is a special session! You all should be grateful!!"

Glenn continued to spew out excuses, and let out a forced laughter.

"Oh... So it seems the rumors from yesterday was true..." Gibul slightly tipped his glasses, and let out a small grunt.

"Huh? What rumors, Gibul?" The well-built Kash asked.

"Teachers needed to regularly submit thesis on the progress of their magic research, but our lovely Glenn over here never bothered with it. Now, with the threat of being fired, he was hoping that the expedition will get him in the administration's good graces, or so the rumor goes."

"F-fired?!"

Upon hearing Gibul's depiction of the events, Lumia leapt up with

colors drained from her face.

"I-is that really true?! Has teacher really not written a thesis?!"

Lumia revealed a pained expression, making it hard for others to look directly at her.

"Ahaha~! W-what are you talking about, I h-have no i-idea...!"

Ah, so he really didn't write a thesis, and now will probably be fired...

Seeing Glenn's constantly swimming eyes, all the students inevitably reached the same conclusion.

"Haa... Pushing your inadequacies on your students, what an irresponsible teacher you are. Not only that, but you are also planning to cut down expenses by taking advantage of your students as unpaid labor, there is a limit to the shamelessness you know..."

Gibul's verbal insults and sharp glare struck deep into Glenn's heart.

"W-what are you talking about, Gibul-kun?! Do you honestly believe I would plan such heinous acts and sully this noble profession?! I ask you to trust in me!"

Glenn's voice crackled in his response. His lack of persuasiveness was evident to all in the classroom.

Now knowing the real reason behind Glenn's sudden expedition, the students once again fell into chatter about the merits of participating.

"R-regardless of the intention, something like an archaeological expedition should be quite a novel experience for you students. Not only participating on expeditions, a magician is also required to participate on all kinds of on-site investigation! The experience of participating on an expedition is definitely a valuable one! Right? Right?!" Glenn desperately pleaded.

"I-indeed, being a member of archaeological expeditions is a dangerous job. There are frequent monster attacks, obstacles of nature, and unimaginable ambushes from ancient traps and guardians... with the occasional unavoidable death. As of such, I definitely won't force any of you to join!"

Death. This one word that made the students skip a breath.

"But this time, the place we will be exploring is that Taum Observatory... Let me reiterate, it is the F-ranked, super novice-friendly Taum Observatory. If you take all this into account, it's rather... Ah, forget it!"

Glenn suddenly leapt into the air and made a twirl.

"P-please save this poor sod! I beeeeg of yooou!!"

Two full flips, followed by a perfect landing with his limbs and head touching the ground. A stellar execution of Glenn's special personalized magic 'Double Moonsault Dogeza'.

Glenn's shameless gesture rendered the whole class speechless.

"Teacher, please raise your head."

Breaking the silence, Lumia unhesitantly stood up.

"...I wish to assist teacher in the expedition."

Lumia brought her clasped hands to her chest, and, with a smile, looked Glenn straight in the eyes. Her appearance reminiscent of a saint, with a bright glow seemingly spreading out from her back.

"Uhh..."

Lumia's resolute appearance made Sistine, who originally planned to participate, shirk back her hands.

"A-angel?!"

Glenn looked up from his dogeza, and was completely entranced by Lumia's display.

"Mm... I know you would definitely join in. Yeah, I am sure of it!"

Finally, Glenn raised himself up triumphantly, his cheeky attitude was already beyond help.

"Yes, I will do my best to help teacher write a splendid thesis... Although, I am not sure how someone inexperienced like me can really help..."

"T-thesis? W-what are you talking about? I don't u-understand where you're getting at!"

Returning to him faking ignorance, Glenn revealed a forced smile at Lumia.

"That and, how could you not be of any help? You are well-versed in healing spells, a bare necessity to surviving in the wilderness. To tell you the truth, at the time when I was planning the expedition for the class, you were one I thought as indispensable. Thanks a bunch!"

Glenn's excessive praise made Lumia let out a chuckle.

Not long after Lumia, another girl spoke up.

"Although I am confused about the details, I will volunteer myself for the expedition."

A young girl stood up in the back, it was Riel, as she announced in her usual half-asleep, expressionless, and almost mechanical state.

"I am Glenn's sword. Just leave Glenn's and Lumia's protection to me."

"Y-you... Ah, forget it, your combat ability as a vanguard is unmatched... Although I sincerely doubt there will be any fights during this expedition. Either way, I'll be relying on you, Riel."

"Mm."

With Lumia and Riel's participation, the classroom had an air of acknowledgment like 'Ah, of course this would happen...' and 'I was certain those two would join...'.

"Sisti, you should hurry up." After Lumia sat back down, she whispered to Sistine.

"Ah... I know... but... Uuu..."

"Sisti?"

For some reason, Sistine did not look very pleased or happy. She had a complicated expression with her mouth tightly shut, seemingly with no intent to declare her participation. Lumia, on the other hand, was unsure what to make of her beloved childhood friend.

Actually, Sistine Fibel was holding a slight childish grudge against Glenn. Although she really wanted to announce her participation, she would rather hear the request from Glenn himself. Basically, she was feeling jealous.

Lumia... you are indispensable.

I'll be relying on you, Riel.

Even Lumia and Riel was directly praised to such extent by Glenn - one known for his lack of directness, the trust that existed between them and Glenn was undeniable. Certainly, if one considered their abilities, it was no wonder why Glenn would place such deep trust in them.

The potency of Lumia's healing spell was not shy to any professional healers, and it was something Sistine could not compare. While the combat strength of Riel, an operative of the Imperial Court Mage Corps, was also unparalleled. Considering the dangers they might encounter on the expedition, there were no better candidates.

Although they were clear choices... an indescribable feeling surged up in Sistine's heart. Simply, Glenn's public display of trust in those two left her unsatisfied and envious.

J-just not long ago, I fought alongside teacher and triumphed over a powerful foe...

If she were to volunteer herself, would Glenn also shower praise upon her?

N-no no no... That definitely won't happen...

"Ah? White Cat? You also want to come? Umm... Given how opinionated you are, I really don't want you to come along. I guess since there aren't any other volunteers, I'll just bring you along. But, please don't be a burden."

Her mind could easily imagine the arrogant Glenn, speaking in a tone that would make her boil inside. Not to mention, the situation would be infinitely worse since he just openly praised and demonstrated his trust in Lumia and Riel.

Uuu... B-but, I really want to go on this archaeological expedition...

Sistine wanted to follow in the footsteps of his grandfather, Redolf Fibel, and become a famous archaeothaumalogist.

To explore the many ruins within Alzano Empire, and to complete her grandfather's dream by solving the mystery of 'Melgalius Sky Castle' itself, were the reasons why she worked so hard in her studies of magic. That and, because of certain personal reasons, Sistine really wanted to explore the 'Taum Observatory' at least once. So to say, in Sistine's heart, she really yearned to go on this expedition. Although her heart did not lie, Sistine's pointless pride and trivial jealousy, along with not being able to directly express herself in front of Glenn, stood in the way of her announcing her intentions.

What can I do? I really want to participate, but also don't want to be treated differently than Lumia and Riel, to be seen like a burden.

Her eyebrows unconsciously furrowed.

"Hmm... Is there anyone else interested in joining?" Glenn beckoned the students from the podium.

At that moment, Glenn casted a glance toward Sistine... but Sistine was agonizing over the decision with her hand over her head, and did not notice Glenn's glance even once.

...T-that's right! If I think about it, experience gained on research expedition can be counted toward our total combat experience! Therefore, I can give the excuse that for the sake of gaining experience, however unwilling I am, I will wish to participate! This way, my participation will be seen as a favor to him!

With the new idea in mind, Sistine recovered her usual vigor.

This way, no matter how the teacher end up evaluating me, I won't lose any face! Yes, let's go with th-...

Just as Sistine was about to raise her hand...

"Then, count me in."

Surprisingly, it was Gibul's voice.

Sistine meekly drooped her head at the interruption.

"Although I have no interest in teacher's continued employment. But doesn't experience gained through research expeditions counts toward our total combat experience? For the sake of building my resume, even if it is just a pointless F-ranked site, I am willing to participate."

My idea was scooped...!!

Sistine went back to hanging her head in frustration. Gibul got to that excuse first.

"Haa... You are really a problematic kid, but it's fine. Now, anyone else?"

W-what to do, what to do, what to do...?!

If I use the same excuse to participate after Gibul, won't it feel very unnatural? Won't people see it as me purposely trying to hide my true desires, that I use the same excuse to pretend to be uninterested? Should I think of some other excuse?

Sistine became trapped within a labyrinth of thought. At the same time, Gibul's announcement rekindled the interest in other students.

"Teacher! Me! Pick me! I love these sorts of adventures! Hey, Cecil, you should come as well!"

"That's right. As a prospective scholar, I am interested in archaeological sites. Teacher, can Kash and I sign up?"

"Really? You do know this isn't a simple field trip, right? Well, fine, you're both in."

The well-built Kash Winger and the taciturn bookworm Cecil Clayton both joined in. The total count of members is now up to five.

"Ah... Teacher, m-me as well."

"Hey! Teacher, if that's the case, please let me join!"

Soon after, the shy and apprehensive Lynn Tittis, and the idol-like Teresa Reidy, both raised their hand in interest.

"Teresa is alright, but... Lynn, are you sure you wish to join? That's a surprise, I always took you for someone quite sheltered."

"T-that... I... I s-still wants t-teacher to keep t-teaching... Umm... Although I may not be much of a help, but c-chores and stuff, I can definitely do... T-therefore, please."

"Ah, is that so. Thank you Lynn, I'll be in your care."

Ugh! I'm so envious of those who could clearly speak their minds!

Sistine could only curse at her own lack of courage.

"That's right, teacher. As for the necessary supplies of the expedition, just leave it to my house - Reidy Conglomerate, to prepare. Of course, all supplies will be prepared at cost, and I will definitely ensure it will be less expensive than anywhere else. This way, we need not have to worry about the quality of the preparatory work, and is definitely in favor of teacher considering

the circumstances... Hehehe~"

Glenn just blankly stared at Teresa's broad smile.

"Hey, Teresa... where did you learn that the school won't cover the expenditures for this expedition?"

"...Ah? What is teacher talking about?"

"It is hard to refuse such beneficial conditions. But still, are you planning to expand your connections within the school and increasing your business experience? For the sake of your conglomerate's future...?"

"Oh? What could you possibly mean?"

"Definitely the scion of a great merchant, how scary... Either way, it will definitely be of a big help."

Uuu... I am jealous of how good a reason and how clear a goal they have...

Sistine continued to hang her head in displeasure.

At this point, after Lynn and Teresa's joining, there was only one spot remaining.

Ugh, I can't care about my pride anymore!

At this point, Sistine finally broke free of her torment.

I don't care what that guy thinks anymore! Other ruins aside, only Taum Observatory... only this one ruins I cannot let by!

With all her strength and courage, Sistine decided to stand up to declare her intention. But just moments before she raised her hand...

"Ah, that's right. About the last spot on the expedition team, to tell you all the truth, I already have decided on someone."

"Wh-...!"

Glenn's sudden declaration caused Sistine to freeze.

Ah...? Am I... done for...?

Sistine's mind turned into a field of white.

"The final member, is someone that I will need on the expedition, even if I have to grovel on the ground to beg them to go."

And then Glenn's glance turned towards Sistine.

"...Ah?"

Looking at Glenn's gaze made Sistine's heart race nonstop.

"The final member is..."

Glenn slowly walked over toward Sistine. He has said it before, it was someone that he was willing to grovel on the ground for.

C-could it... really be...?!

As Glenn approached, Sistine's heart beat faster and faster.

T-teacher, even though he doesn't speak of it, within his heart...

Sistine could barely contain her joy.

...However.

Huh...? Ah?!

Glenn walked right past Sistine's seat...

"Wendy, the last person must be you. Could you please participate? I beg of you!" Glenn said to Wendy Nablesse, located five seats behind Sistine.

Bam!

Sistine's collapsed back down, and landed her forehead squarely on her desk.

"How can a highly respectable lady like me go to such a rustic place?"

Wendy held her face with one hand and tilted her head away, displaying a clear disinterest in the prospect.

"To write a thesis, I need to decipher the words on the tablets. Perhaps there could be some new findings in the interpretation. As someone well-known to be a genius at deciphering encoded messages, I need you on the expedition."

"..." Wendy quietly thought to herself

"S-so? How about it? I beg of you, I will definitely vouch for your safety. A-although I am certain there would be no danger to begin with, but in one-in-a-million chance, I will definitely keep you safe. So please participate!"

Glenn begged with his hand clasped.

After looking at Glenn through the corner of her eyes, Wendy let out a sigh.

"Haa... I really don't know what to do with you..."

Wendy begrudgingly agreed to join.

"It's not unusual for a noble to survey how the commoners lived, that and responding to the request of commoners is also a duty of nobles... Although I am somewhat unwilling, I will still go."

"T-thank you! Wendy-chan, I love you~!"

"Stop it! How disgusting! A gentlemen should not act so flirtatiously before a lady, a gentlemen is..."

Wendy began to lecture the ecstatic Glenn on the meaning of gentlemen.

...On the other hand.

"..."

Sistine's time has completely froze.

"Sisti, what happened...? You clearly were excited to participate in the expedition..."

"Sistine? Hmm? Not responding at all... How odd."

Sistine could no longer hear Lumia's worried voice or Riel's

emotionless inquiries. She completely blanked out, looking back and seeing how her pointless pride has prevented her from participating in the opportunity of a lifetime. How shallow and childish she was.

The surrounding students was also confused. "How come both Lumia and Riel were participating, yet Sistine was left behind?" Such peculiar development was difficult to explain.

"Ah, wait! I am not done with my talk yet...!"

"Uhh... Alrighty...!"

Glenn backpedaled away from Wendy and returned to the podium.

"With this, the expedition team is set! I thank you all for your time and assistance! Let us gather together after class to discuss the details and preparations of the expedition."

As Glenn called the discussion to a close...

"Hmm?"

Sistine wobbled up to Glenn like an emotionless cadaver.

"W-what is it, White Cat... A-are you planning to criticize me for not writing a thesis?!"

Glenn reflexively took a step back from the approaching Sistine.

"N-no! Its n-not my mistake, White Cat! R-rather, it is a p-problem of the system...!"

However.

"Uuu... Ahh..."

"...?"

"T-that... T-the..."

Sistine's eye were filled with tears, and her mouth opened and closed repeatedly like a fish out of water. Quite evident that she was trying to say something, but the words that come out from her

made little sense.

"Umm... What is wrong? You are scaring me..."

Sistine suppressed voice sounded angry, but at the same time, conflicted. The unusual appearance of Sistine made Glenn unable to respond.

Lumia let out a pained smile from behind, and using hand signals (one of the absolutely necessary skill of a magician) to hint at Sistine's true desires, and then lowered her head in request for Glenn.

"Ah... So that's how it is. And here I thought..."

After a moment's pause, Glenn, who finally realized Sistine's true intentions, simply shook his head a few times, and with a pained visage, let out a long sigh.

Glenn then turned to the class and announced, "Then, can I leave you to be the leader of the expedition, White Cat?"

"...Mm?"

At that moment, White Cat let out a surprised look at Glenn.

Glenn continued, "Ah, I was obviously planning to bring you along. Regardless of whether you are willing or not, I was going to drag you along. I decided upon this from the very beginning... Yeah."

"B-but, why... me?"

"Umm... Regardless of how it is, I am someone who is unfamiliar with archaeothaumatology... How to put this, I need someone to consult, basically an expert I guess. Don't you fit the bill perfectly?"

"E-expert? M-me?!"

"Y-yeah, either way, only you I need to force to come along regardless of what you think. Even if it means abusing my power as a teacher. If you refuse this request, I will forcibly fail you... Hehehe~"

"Y-you...!"

Light returned to the husk-like Sistine.

"T-to use grades to forcibly make students participate, y-you are a complete trash! W-why can't you just ask me normally?!"

"No can do, I don't like to hold in my feelings like a certain someone, you copy?"

"Uuu... F-fine! This time is an exception! D-don't think to use such unreasonable methods in the future! S-speaking of which, you only landed yourself in this dilemma because of y-your poor professionalism."

Sistine angrily launched a verbal barrage, and now naturally transitioned into lecturing Glenn. But, to any outside observer, it was quite obvious that Sistine was ecstatic about being able to participate in the expedition.

Haa... What a troublesome girl.

This time, everyone, including Glenn, came to the same conclusion.



In the week that followed.

While class went on as usual, the details of the expedition, the daily travels, and the necessary supplies needed to be ironed out. Other than the meetings to discuss the details, members of the expedition also needed to complete outdoor survival training. The tasks at hand was numerous. Before long, after nonstop and grueling work, the penultimate day before the final departure has arrived.

In the bustling southern district of Fejite, at a small discreet pub hidden away in the mazelike alleyways, Glenn sat on the counter.

"Mm... I think the hardest part is finally over..."

The enervated Glenn let himself rest on the counter. With the final

preparations wrapped up today, Glenn could finally take a breather.

"Although those kids still think it will be like a picnic... that should be fine, as long as I carefully watch over them."

But Glenn was not in the position to force discipline upon them.

As long as everyone ensure their own responsibilities...

"Then..."

Glenn's purpose for coming to this small pub was not for its alcohol, it was to meet up with a certain someone. But that person have yet to arrive, Glenn did arrive an hour early after all.

"Hmph... I guess I got here too early."

Normally, Glenn would barely arrive on time, but coincidentally he had something to do in the nearby southern district, so he arrived unusually early.

"Sleepy... Is there nothing here with which I could pass the time...?"

The bored Glenn rummaged through the bag at his side, and found a stack of paper within.

"Hmm? This is..."

He pulled out the stack of paper from the many stuff left within the bag. It was a thesis on magic.

The title was 'Investigation: Regarding Taum Observatory and Spatial-Temporal Magic'

"Ah... So this was the paper that headmaster mentioned. It was because of this paper that we were compelled to reinvestigate the Taum Observatory."

A few days ago, Glenn used his privilege as a teacher to take out a copy of the thesis from the Academy's library, but soon forgotten it in his bag.

"Speaking of which, because of how busy we have been with our preparations, I never got the opportunity to read the paper..."

If a certain white-haired girl was present, she would definite shout 'that is really irresponsible of you' and begin a long lecture.

"...Either way, I have some time to burn."

Glenn flipped through the paper as he let out a yawn.

The citations of prior research looked pretty normal. It spoke of a previous expedition and their findings at the Taum Observatory, as well as associated papers on the site, and the translations of the tablets. Overall, a pretty straight forward introduction.

From the looks of it, that site really is worthless...

Glenn lazily flipped through the paper.

The numerous tablets within the Observatory were all translated, but none that was worth mentioning within the field of archaeothaumatology - or rather, was of benefit to the research into sorcery. The structure of the ruins has been completely analyzed, and all of the hidden chambers were well documented. There really wasn't anything left to discover at the ruins.

To be worthless to such a degree, it is a rather scary thought, considering what the thesis is arguing.

Glenn was now worried about how to go about writing his own thesis, and let out a yawn at the thought.

When reaching the part about the author's own research and insights, the contents of the paper took a drastic turn.

Taum Observatory was recognized by everyone in the magical community as a completely worthless site. Yet, the author challenged that widely held opinion, and concluded that Taum Observatory was an ancient ritual site for spatial-temporal magic, a huge magic installation.

Speaking of which, how did he reach such a ridiculous

conclusion?

With a sarcastic smile, Glenn flipped the page with a single finger.

Mastery over time and space, also known as spatial-temporal magic, was the greatest mystery of Black Magic. Because of how absurd it was, there was bound to be multiple restrictions to its activation. For example, the limitation described by magic theory. However, this thesis contested that, as long as one properly activate the installation, one would be able to freely manipulate time and space. In other words, time travel... Obviously something purely of fantasy.

Ha! Clearly the author was overthinking it. If there really was a device as the author described... How to say this... Won't the world be already destroyed?

Glenn unconsciously let out a chuckle.

"...! ...Oh?!"

Slowly, Glenn became more and more absorbed in the thesis. The various different tablets and drawings showed evidence of the ancients' research into spatial-temporal magic. The different perspective toward the analysis of the expedition results: How long distance teleportation requires spirit veins, and that the similarity between the described spirit veins and the one at Taum Observatory. Theoretical study with such similarities as a basis, thought experiments, and so forth...

Glenn could not help but think about what compelled the author to go to such great length for his research. The incredible concentration and imagination that went into the conjectures, almost as if perfectly building a castle in the air, attracted and excited every fiber of Glenn's attention. It convinced readers that the worthless Taum Observatory was an important ancient installation, and made readers believe its purpose was undoubtedly for spatial-temporal magic. However, the most

important part of the paper, the part that tied all the theories together: the evidence of magic in the temple, was nowhere to be found. "Why? How can this happen? Was something missing from the site? Did we overlook something?" The words of the thesis permeated the distraught feelings of the author.

"Ah... I have ended up reading it all at once."

Glenn took a deep breath, and put away the thesis. He then took a glance at the time, and noticed he had burned more time than he expected.

"But still, the report definitely would compel people to reinvestigate the site. At the same time, not one of those well-established professors was willing to take up the expedition... Certainly, no matter how well one writes a follow-up paper, it will feel like a cheap knockoff of the original."

Despite not presenting any strong evidence, this thesis was undoubtedly the magnum opus of its author. The imagination and thought experiments, the carefully formulated reasoning, and the crisp conclusions were all deserving of study by others.

"...So who wrote this wonderful paper?"

Glenn excitedly flipped to the cover and read the author's name.

'Redolf Fibel'

"Hmm? Fibel... Why does that name sound familiar..."

The image of a certain talkative platinum-haired girl began to float into his mind... Just at that moment.

"What a rare occurrence, it's rare to see you arriving earlier than me."

"Wah!"

The sudden cool voice that rang out from behind his back gave Glenn a scare. Glenn quickly caught the thesis he reflexively dropped, and glared at the youth with critical eyes.

"D-don't scare me like that, Albert!"

"You are too careless. If I were an assassin, I would've killed you three times over." The cool youth, Albert, emotionlessly replied.

It was a scheduled day for their periodic exchange of Intel.

"I've heard you gotten yourself into something troublesome, Glenn."

"Ah, that is..."

"Hmph, to need your students to cover for your mistakes, you are honestly beyond help."

After the sharp criticism, Albert sat himself next to Glenn.

Of course, Albert was well aware where Glenn will be heading tomorrow, his cool appearance contained a tinge of anger and frustration.

"Uhh... N-no... That is, some special circumstances developed on my end..."

"..."

Albert did not care for Glenn's excuses, but silently gestured to the bartender, to which a glass of brandy that slid down the counter into Albert's hand.

"Haa... You bastard is really merciless."

Glenn also gestured for a glass of brandy.

With drinks in hand, the two exchanged details about recent developments - The current situation of the Imperial Government, the movements of the military, as well as news from the magic academy. Overall, a very professional exchange of Intel.

"Speaking of which, Albert, were there any movements from *that* organization?"

Glenn shifted the topic to one of his interest.

"Those people... Lately, they have been unusually calm..."

That organization they were discussing was the one that targeted the disowned princess, the forbidden ability user Lumia, and would go to any lengths to capture her - the cult that called themselves the 'Researchers of Divine Wisdom'.

"But they did make an attempt on the princess a few days ago."

"W-what?! Is that true?!"

The unexpected answer led to Glenn's sudden outburst, an outburst that echoed in the quiet pub.

"...Calm yourself. Don't let something as petty as this disturb your cool."

"Yes..."

Albert kept his usual cool, and quietly sipped his glass of brandy.

"So what happened exactly?" After a pause, Glenn asked Albert.

"We discovered it early, and have quietly disposed of the ones involved." Albert briskly replied, almost as if nothing has happened. To which, Glenn let out a long sigh.

"Ah, how to say this. With you around, we can really sleep without a worry."

Glenn took a sip of brandy, the liquid was tasteless in his mouth.

"Likely it was some eager members operating on their own. There were no high ranking member among them, and their overall skill was pitifully low. They were all complete and utter trash."

"But, as long as we have you standing guard, no matter how strong the enemy, they are nothing more than trash. Isn't that right?"

Glenn then shrugged his shoulders at Albert's silence. It was quite unimaginable that something like this happened in the city without his awareness.

Glenn was originally a member of the Imperial Court Mage

Corps. Although only a measly third-ranked magician, he can always pull through in life and death battles. But compared to that, Albert was able to clean everything up without the notice of Glenn. While his actions was less disruptive, it was somewhat terrifying to be guarded in the shadows.

"Since then, those people do not seem to have any major movements. For the time being, it can be said that the princess is safe."

"I-is that so..."

With the wonderful news, Glenn relaxed his expression, only to have Albert rain on his parade.

"But, by the Intel we got from the higher-ups, it seems that the organization has taken to a new direction. One can rather say, they are preoccupied so as to ignore the princess for now."

"New direction...?"

"That's correct. The organization has realigned its focus on a new direction, and have a new goal at hand. We are unsure of the details. 'Hermit' and 'Hierophant' are looking into it."

"..."

"That and, recently, Jatice Lowfan's movement are quite concerning."

Jatice Lowfan: The ex-operative of the Imperial Court Mage Corps that was responsible for the tragedy that unfolded around Glenn and Sistine during the previous month. A complete and utter madman.

"The Jatice that faked his own death, and then hid away for over a full year before returning... After that encounter with you, he seemed to be active in the regions around Fejite, wiping out anyone with relations to the Researchers of Divine Wisdom... occasionally getting innocent civilians involved in his rampage."

The topic instantly made Glenn's stomach churn.

Jatice was a dangerous individual who believed in his own form of justice. If necessary, he would not hesitate to murder innocents, and would not be ridden with any guilt, for he earnestly believed his actions to reflect 'justice'.

"Just this morning, the Court Mage Division sent out a subjugation force to the eastern regions to eliminate Jatice. In the ensuing battle, the force was completely wiped, falling completely for his trap."

"Darn him... He is acting hostile to both the empire and the cultists, just what exactly is he trying to achieve?"

The sound of Glenn's fist smashing at the counter echoed in the empty pub.

"I am not sure, but it feels like he is searching for something. It also seemed like he is purposely revealing himself, baiting others into attacking him."

"That bastard..."

With an unusual interest in Glenn, Jatice was someone hard to figure out. Rather, it would be unthinkable for a normal person to understand the thoughts of a madman.

"In the past few years, the conflict with the neighboring Kingdom of Rezalia has been heating up. Just recently, the sudden rise and maneuvers of the extreme right party - Order of Saint Carol, made the inquisition more aggressive with clamp down on religious texts. Regardless, there were too much going on for the military to pay attention."

Just then, Albert calmly changed the topic.

"After the higher-ups' deliberations, it was decided that for a while, the protection of the princess to be wholly given to the 'Chariot', and I will be summoned back to headquarters. Once my orders are complete, I will return at the earliest time possible..."

Sorry."

"You are being called back from Fejite? I guess the personnel shortage is quite real..."

Such was the case for Glenn back in the days as well.

As among the strongest of the Imperial Court Mage Corps, Albert could easily complete many difficult missions, and was a favorite among the top brass of the military. It was not the least due in part to how he could coldly execute any task assigned to him.

"It can't be helped. Neither the enemy nor we have infinite military power at our disposal. If no fish is going to bite the 'bait', then there won't be a need for a 'fisherman' to stand by. Although saying it like this leaves a bad aftertaste."

Bait. Albert said with a tinge of sarcasm, but sadly it reflected the thoughts of the military and the government.

Lumia was the 'bait' for the hostile organization to reveal their cards. As of such, she could not freely decide to withdraw from school. She had to remain in the most conspicuous Magic Academy, where to the military and government, she served both as 'bait' and 'surveillance target'. If something were to happen, she could also turn into 'target for elimination'. Additionally, by keeping her among magicians, her unique abilities would not be easily revealed to others.

With such distasteful methods, Alicia the Seventh must be worried sick for her beloved daughter.

Speaking of which, why have the Researchers of Divine Wisdom... changed their focus...?

To this very day, the Researchers of Divine Wisdom would use every trick in their arsenal to get their hands on Lumia - dead or alive. It was not wrong to think that for the sake of a certain goal of theirs, the Researchers of Divine Wisdom needed to get their hands on the unique ability holder Lumia.

Yet, the organization now was up to something else... certainly a matter worthy of concern.

Was Lumia no longer an essential target to their plans?

Glenn's anxiety began to rise rapidly at the realization.

During the last field trip, the Project: Revive Life incident... Did I overlook something?

Worrisome matters kept on piling up. Yet no matter how hard they thought about it, there was not a single lead to follow.



Chapter 2: Visitor in the Storm

Under the crumbling starry night.

I reminisced as I sprinted down the endless 'Corridor of Stars' alone, of when I first arrived in this world, of my most distant memories.

...

...That time, I suddenly opened my eyes.

Stretched out before me was a madder red sky burning as far as the eye can see, my skin itched from the parched air as I lay atop the scorched wasteland.

I was seemingly involved in some sort of incident. My body was covered with terrible wounds, and blood soaked my skin. My clothes also lay in tatters, with too few pieces to identify its original design.

What worried me the most was that I had no recollection of the events past. Who am I, what I did, why am I here... Even *now*, I still remembered nothing.

Amnesia. Because of some incident I was involved in, I lost all my prior memory.

And there was nothing to help me remember my identity.

As one without my memory, it can be said that I was without a refuge.

Memories were the chains that tether a person to the world they live in. Without memories, I would slowly fade away from this world with the passage of time.

Just as I grew anxious at the prospect, the other me - a voice from deep within my soul - whispered to me.

"I am... Heavens (Celica)..."

It was my only remaining memory, the one memory which defines my existence, the name for which I can call myself. It was, above all else, my only refuge.

The memory that proved I was connected to this world, that I did not appear spontaneous from the aether.

Yes, You... I, am Celica.

You... I, must fulfill my mission.

After receiving my own name, under the guidance of the 'voice', the time that has once stopped began to move again.

From then on.

I, Celica Arfonia, began to wander in this endless nightmare.

...Those were the events that transpired four centuries ago.



The day of the expedition has finally arrived.

Under the gray sky and shrouded in morning mist, Glenn and his expedition team departed from Fejite in a grand double-decker carriage.

"The breeze is quite nice..."

"Mm..."

Sistine sat at the corner of the upper deck, gently held down her long hair blowing in the wind. Besides her sat Lumia, who nodded with a smile.

After passing through Fejite's northern gate, what greeted them was a vast expanse of farmland. The cool and fresh air gave everyone a wonderful sense of nature.

The carriage travelled down the Arugoo Highway, connecting Fejite to the imperial capital Orlando.

The meandering north-northeast highway extended all the way to the horizon. To their right were towering hills, and to their left were dense forests, with snow-capped mountain range visible far behind the sea of trees. When they lift their heads, they could see the clear blue sky, with the occasional puffy white clouds floating by.

The smell of the soil and grass tickled their noses, punctuated by the calls of an eagle soaring above. At a next bend of the road, they saw a heard of sheep grazing on the grass.

The picturesque journey soothed their souls.

"It's nice to experience the outdoors once in a while."

"Ah, yes. The air is so fresh..."

Wendy and Lynn, who also sat on the upper deck, remarked.

"So many... fat... sheep."

Riel seemingly was very absorbed with the sheep herd. Sitting next to Lumia, her sleepy eyes stared attentively at the herd below.

"Hey, Sisti, if all goes according to plan, should we be arriving at the site just around sundown?"

Lumia asked Sistine as she reflected on the itinerary.

"That's right. 'Taum Observatory' is surprisingly close. Until we arrive, let us fully enjoy this leisurely trip."

Sistine replied with a smile. But, as if she remembered something unpleasant, her smile slowly vanished from her face.

"Speaking of which, despite the wonderful view up here, teacher and the others are..."

...Cooped up on the lower deck. Those sitting above could only give a long sigh.



Down below, a life and death struggle took place.

"How's this! Heart flush!"

"Oh? Hehehe... Sorry, teacher, I got a full house. I guess it's my win?"

"Haa?! How can it be?!"

"Really?! To have hidden such a hand! Teresa is strong!"

Glenn, Teresa, and the boys were sitting around the table, playing a game of five card stud.

"Looks like I am sweeping the pool again~"

Teresa collected the large pile of chips on the table.

"Heh... Everyone, aren't you all glad that the bets are not with real money?"

The amicable banter of Teresa made everyone tremble.

"Darn it! How can this be...? Even I, who was known to be the legendary gambler of the Imperial Casinos, lost?!"

Being completely demolished by Teresa, Glenn hanged his head in defeat.

Gibul, who, at the beginning of the game, confidently remarked that 'Card games are not purely luck, it is a game of calculation and probability.' was also...

"N-no way! S-speaking from probability and statistics, such a situation is impossible!"

His face reflected his humiliation, with sweats pouring down his head.

"There really is such a thing as 'divine luck'... Ah, Teresa, could you lend me another ten chips."

"D-definitely worthy of being a merchant's daughter... Ah, I would

like ten chips as well."

Kash and Cecil, who were completely defeated by Teresa, gave up on the senseless struggle against fate.

D-darn it! How is it that I lost?! Even after I pulled those tricks!
Glenn howled in his heart.

Certainly, Glenn was cheating. Forced shuffling, hand mucking, false dealing - Glenn was pulling every trick to merciless defeat his students, far from the adult he was supposed to be... Yet, luck did not seem to be with him...

M-my technique was perfect, so how could this be?!

For example, when Glenn was the dealer, he would purposely deal a poor hand to Teresa, but after she swap just a few cards, her hand would turn into something incredible, almost as if a superior power was guiding her from behind.

Darn it! So far, I didn't deal myself too strong a hand to avoid arousing suspicion, but as things stand, I can't worry about that anymore! I will use my greatest technique to bury Teresa once and for all!

The next round.

Glenn happened to be the dealer and, using all his tricks in the shuffle, controlled the cards each student received.

P-perfect! Hahaha...! This time, I'm going to win for sure!

Glenn looked at his hand, and flashed a miscreant smile.

Four sevens with a wild card, under their rules, a five of a kind hand.

A secret (and cheap) technique taught to him by Bernard 'the Hermit' during his time in the Imperial Court Mage Corps.

Although still far from pulling off the Royal Straight Flush like master, this time I am sure to win! Die, Teresa!

The arrogant Glenn easily went all-in with his hand.

"Ah...? The hand doesn't look very promising..."

Teresa took a glance at her hand, and then discarded all her cards without an ounce of hesitation.

"Teacher, deal me five."

?!

What Teresa discarded just then was a four of a kind purposely dealt by Glenn. Although it was below Glenn's five of a kind, the hand itself was not bad at all.

A-after only a glance, to discard her entire hand?!

With a sense of foreboding, Glenn shakily dealt five new cards to Teresa...

"Oh? A Royal Straight Flush."

"Y-you got to be kidding me!!"

Teresa let out a small chuckle as she revealed her hand: Ten, Jack, Queen, King, and Ace of Spades. Faced with the strongest hand, Glenn threw the deck of cards into the air in a fit of tantrum, and began to scream in frustration.





"Seriously, what is happening down there?"

Sistine remarked and let out an angry sigh after hearing the noise from below.

"To gamble against Teresa is a fool's errand... Her inhuman luck could easily overcome any tricks." Wendy replied with a 'may they rest in peace' attitude.

"Umm, I am really sorry for all the ruckus my companions are causing..." Sistine turned and apologized to the carriage driver.

The coachman was hired together with the carriage.

"..."

Dressed in a hooded long robe that reached all the way down to the foot, the coachman only took a quick glimpse at Sistine, and then gave a slight nod. The hood completely covered the eyes, so it was hard to make out his expressions. But either way, it doesn't seem the coachman was particular about the noisy passengers.

After seeing the coachman's accommodating response, Sistine was able to regain her usual calm. At that moment.

"Speaking of which, there does seem to be quite a lot of ancient structures in the empire... Like, what is that?" Wendy noted as she peered out from the side of the carriage and pointed at the object below.

The sides of the road were dotted by numerous stone steles, known to be remnants of the past. Not just stone steles, but also stone circles, castle ruins, and ancient tombs. Ever since the expedition has departed from Fejite, there were all over the land, in sizes large and small. Although the northern region was known for many small sites, the empire as a whole was not much different.

"From what I recall, Alzano Empire was built upon the site of a previous civilization - the one known to be incredibly advanced in

sorcery."

"Yes, I have heard of that as well."

Wendy confirmed Lynn's statement.

"That's right! Let us talk about that advanced sorcerous civilization!"

Sistine hijacked the conversation with her excitement barely contained.

"Just as Wendy and Lynn said, on the site that the empire was founded, or roughly the northeastern region of the North Selford Continent, there used to be a civilization highly advanced in sorcery. From the numerous ruins, paintings, and tablets that lie all over the empire, to the verbal history and songs of the nomadic tribes in the south, then to the numerous sorcerous relics unearthed in ruins, all point squarely to its existence! The civilization was estimated to have started from..."

Sistine began to lecture endlessly without anyone's prompting.

"Ugh, here it comes: the archaeology otaku..."

"Sorry, Wendy. Sistine is like a different person whenever this topic is brought up."

Lumia sheepishly smiled and apologized to the somewhat annoyed Wendy.

"...And so, before the holy calendar was adopted, history was separated into the metachron, the theochron, the anachron, the early, mid, and late paleochron, and the early and late neochron. From archaeological evidence, the advanced sorcerous civilization flourished between early to mid paleochron, or roughly between the eighth millennium and fourth millennium before the holy calendar. As we are currently in the year 1853 of the holy calendar, we are talking about a civilization with an understanding of magic that surpassed ours over fifty-eight hundred years ago! Isn't that amazing?! Fifty-eight hundred years! It's something really

hard to believe."

"Oh, I have a question." Wendy asked while showing a tinge of annoyance.

Seemingly Sistine's excitement finally forced others to just follow along rather than resist.

"I was always slightly baffled by this, but what exactly is an advanced sorcerous civilization? Why do we not just call it an advanced magic civilization? From purely a definition standpoint, if I remember correctly..."

Magic and Sorcery. Although the two words are synonyms, their meanings were vastly different. While both could exert an effect on the surrounding world, the ones that could not be explained by the prevailing magical and physical theories are referred to as 'Sorcery', and the ones that could were referred to as 'Magic'. As an example, a sorcerous spell would be one where a cookie was spontaneously created out of thin air, while a magic spell would be one where the a cookie was created from its basic ingredients through alchemy. In short, unlike sorcery, as long as one works hard enough to learn the prerequisite knowledge, one can easily perform magic.

"That's right, Wendy. The dictionary's definition is quite accurate." Sistine proudly answered with her chest puffed. "What the ancients called magic, to our modern eyes, are no different from sorcery - an incredible power we cannot come to fathom. Their civilization was built upon spells in which our meager knowledge could not hope to understand, and for that reason, we refer to them as a sorcerous civilization."

"Speaking of which, if I remember correctly..." Lynn joined in on the conversation, "About the artifacts that were recovered from the civilization's ruins - the sorcerous relics. After repeated research and experimentation, researchers were able to identify their function, and could activate the sorcery as long as they follow the

accepted procedure. However, as far as their construction and the theories that governed their function was concerned, such as how they casted the sorcery, or what is the underlying mechanism for its activation, all remained unanswered. Was that about right?"

"Precisely! Which is why archaeothaumatoologists refer to the magic that we, the modern people, learn as 'Modern magic', while refer the inexplicable magic used by the ancients as 'ancient magic'." With that said, Sistine gazed at the skies above Fejite and toward the mirage-like floating castle tucked away between the clouds. "It was postulated that the sky castle itself was among the many structures constructed by 'ancient magic'."

Everyone followed her gaze to the sky castle.

"I want to solve the mystery of the ancient civilization. Questions like 'why did the ancients build a floating castle?', 'why did they hid it in the gap between dimensions?', 'what secrets lie within the castle?', 'what exactly is ancient magic?', and 'how did such an advanced civilization meet its demise?', I hope to one day know the answers."

One day, for sure, I will reach the sky castle and see for myself the scene that my grandfather yearned till his dying breath.

"Then, good luck with that dream!"

Wendy smiled wryly at the determined Sistine.

"Thank you, Wendy. I should also mention..."

Sistine once again restarted her lecture on archaeology. The others could only flash a complicated expression in response, and soon, everyone sat through another long monologue...

"...And so it was, the wise King Crowe the First was able to unify the neighboring land using the might of sorcery, and established the sorcerous kingdom of Melgalius, a dynasty that remained in power for four millennium."

"W-wait a moment!"

Suddenly noticing the unusual surroundings, Wendy interrupted Sistine's discourse and asked.

"W-where... are we heading?"

"Ah...?" At Wendy's reminder, Sistine also came to be perplexed by the change.

Looking around, they noticed the carriage was now driving in the forest originally to their left. Behind them, the hills that had flanked their journey were barely visible at the edge of the horizon. The highway they had been travelling on has long turned to a small dirt road. While busily chatting away atop the carriage, they didn't notice when the carriage has already left the highway, and travelling toward an unfamiliar destination.

"Hey! Wait a minute, coachman! This is not the route we agreed upon!" Sistine hastily rushed to the front of the carriage and questioned the coachman.

But, the coachman remained silent as he continued to drive the carriage.

"This is the wrong way! If we leave the highway and head into the forests..."

The trip will risk danger.

Steam powered transportation only existed in the north of the empire, within the Iteria Region. Elsewhere, geographical conditions or the lack of railroads precluded its possibility. As of such, much of the transportation between cities was carried out by carriages.

The empire personally maintained the few important highways, and would periodically send out the expeditions to clear out any monsters nearby, or even casted anti-monster wards. As of such, the imperial highways were comparatively safe, with the fields and hills nearby the highways have long been subjugated by humans.

However, conversely speaking, if one would depart from the

designated highways, the surroundings would quickly grow dangerous. Especially the deep forests, the natural caves, and the mountain ranges on the borderlands, places that lay untouched from human civilization, where many dangerous monsters live.

Granted, there were few monster sightings in this region, but it was still foolish to depart from the safety of highways.

"Please head back! Quickly!" Sistine, who was worried about everyone's safety, could not help but shout.

"..."

However, the coachman continued to ignore Sistine's pleas, and silently led the carriage forward.

"W-wait, why are you...?! Stop!"

By now, to not elicit a single response from the coachman, something was clearly abnormal.

"W-what is going on?! W-who exactly are you?!"

Sistine grew more and more impatient.

At the same time, in the undergrowth of the forest, to the left of the carriage...

Plop plop plop...

The sight of numerous shadows approaching.

"Huh? What?! Could it be...?!" Sistine frustratedly cried.

Countless silhouettes leapt out from the bushes, and quickly enveloped the carriage from the front and behind. With their swift movement, the carriage was soon surrounded.

Neeeeigh! The horse, startled by the sudden appearance, came to an abrupt halt, and began to whine loudly.

The true identity of the attacker was...

"S-Shadow Wolves?!"

The carriage was fully encircled by ten or so shadow wolves.

Shadow wolves were known to have knife-like teeth and claws, with eyes that struck fear deep into the heart of their pray. Covered from head to toe in jet black fur, they were commonly sighted in forests, but it did not take away from the danger they impose.

Beyond the razor-sharp teeth and claws, the shadow wolf exhibited an almost unparalleled agility. No matter if it was with weapons or spells, unless the user was a battle-tested veteran, landing a solid hit was nearly impossible.

"I have never known such dangerous monsters can appear around here... Coachman, what exactly is your intention for bringing us here...?!"

"..."

Yet, the coachman, without a single motion, remained silent and held tightly onto the reins to prevent the horse from running wild.

"Ugh...!"

Sistine clenched her teeth in anger, but now was not the time to interrogate the coachman. They needed to first ensure everyone's safety.

Shadow Wolves. The only reason they are categorized as monsters and not beasts is because of their unique ability.

The ability of 'Fear Detection'. The shadow wolf could intuitively know whether it's target is in fear of it, and by extension, know whether the prey is an easy target.

"Everyone, do not fear! If you fear, then..." Sistine tried to warn everyone, but it was already too late.

"Ahh... M-monsters.... T-there are so many..."

"Uuu... W-why must this happen to me...!!"

Lynn and Wendy were shaking uncontrollably, the colors drained

from their faces.

Their reaction was rather expected. Despite being magicians, we have always lived sheltered lives, away from the dangers of the world. To suddenly be thrust into a circle of ferocious monsters, one would find a hard time maintaining calm. Even I am utterly terrified before such a sight.

Sistine took deep breathes to try to calm her racing heart, biting down hard on her teeth to hide her fear.

The situation was quickly turning from bad to worse. Once the shadow wolves were set on a target, they would become highly aggressive, borderline suicidal. They would completely shrug off any injuries and devote all their attention to launching a barrage of attacks.

Possibly smelling the fear that emanated from the girls, the wolf directly before them lowered its body and entered into an attack stance. The wolves seemingly recognized the group before them as easy prey, and have begun to search for the opportunity to pounce. No matter how many magic bolts are shot at them, the wolves would dodge them with their incredible agility, and go straight for the girls neck.

"Sisti, are you alright?"

"I-I am good. But, speaking of which, what happened to Riel?"

"Not good. I tried to wake her earlier, but it seems that she is completely asleep."

At such a critical moment, the most reliable person was comfortably napping on Lumia's lap.

"I think it was because of how excited she was for the expedition, she wasn't able to sleep at all last night."

"Haa... And I had to pick topics that were confusing for her..."
Sistine could not help but let out a sigh.

While she may be a veteran soldier and the bodyguard for Lumia, at her very core she was just a young girl. Everyone wished she would act more her age, so it was hard for anyone to fault her this time.

"I doubt they will risk coming after us atop the carriage, but we will be stuck here if they finish off the horse. So at the very least, we need to defend the horse." Sistine stared bitterly at the shadow wolf, "Coachman, while I still have many questions for your inexplicable actions, but the situation is becoming dangerous. It would be best if you come up to the upper deck so that we can protect you..."

"Stop! You bastards!"

Bam! The window of the carriage was swung open with a bang. Glenn, who has finally noticed something was amiss, peered out from the window.

"You bastards! How dare you lay a hand on my students?!" Glenn declared with his arms crossed on his chest, "Let me send you all to your makers! Now!"

With one foot on the windowsill, he leapt out of the carriage. "Hmph!"

Just as Glenn landed after performing a triple somersault...

Crack!

His right foot made a weird sound.

"..."

For a few seconds, Glenn remained in his prideful pose, "Uuu... Ouuuch!! Ahhh!!" but it quickly collapsed with him holding his feet in agony, rolling back and forth on the ground.

"Ahhh!! The pain, the pain!!"

"Hey! W-what exactly are you trying to pull?! To attempt such a stunt on a ground as uneven as this, are you an idiot?!" Sistine held

her head in disbelief.

The teacher was really useless in an emergency.

"Sisti! Not good! The teacher...!"

"Ah, right! Darn it!"

Lumia's worried cry brought Sistine back to reality. Sistine and the others are safe, because they stayed inside the carriage. But for the idiotic Glenn who leapt out and injured himself, the shadow wolves won't let such an opportunity pass by.

Growl!

Three shadow wolves turned their focus to the defenseless Glenn and pounced.

"Ugh! *Pierce, lance of light!*" Sistine hastily chanted an offensive spell to intercept the approaching shadow wolf.

However, the wolf easily dodged Sistine's attack with a slight hop, and continued its charge at Glenn, with its sharp teeth and claws mere inches away from Glenn's flesh.

"T-Teacher?!" Sistine shouted frantically at what was about to unfold.

"Thy crimes match mine • At the crossroad of dusk • Methinks of thee."

Suddenly, an unfamiliar chant sounded next to Sistine, soon followed by a terrible whirlwind.

Uuu!Kyu!Kyaa!

The three wolves that were attacking Glenn were torn asunder.

"...Ah?!" Sistine could only gasp in surprise. "...Hmm?"

Before anyone noticed, the coachman moved to protect Glenn.

"..."

Standing before the Glenn who was planning to pull out a pistol

in defense, the coachman carried a sword at the ready. Likely, the coachman pulled the sword from under the large hooded robe.

The sword was a longsword, one commonly favored by knights on horseback from a time long past. It boasted a strong first strike but was known to be quite unwieldy. In a modern age, where the emphasis had shifted to slender blades that was light and agile, the obsolete longsword was somewhat of a rare sight on the battlefield.

T-that coachman was a swordsman? No, just earlier...

Sistine was absorbed by the sword's beautiful craftsmanship. Even Sistine, who was unfamiliar with swords, could tell at a single glance that the longsword was a masterpiece. It was a sword, made not of the prized wootzsteel of the empire, but of a material far, far above - the sorcerous metal, mithril. A sword that was made by the repeated honing a material whose strength and sharpness lie far above mere iron.

At a glance, the length of the sword gave a slight sense of unwieldiness, but at the same time, the sharpness of the blade was second to none, with a faint bluish glow emitting from the surface. The mirror-like smoothness showed no sign of wear, with a crossguard richly decorated with precious metal. As a weapon, it was lethal beyond compare, and as a work of art, it was captivating to all who see. The sword was the perfect mixture of practicality and beauty - the undeniable magnum opus of its swordsmith.

The coachman clenched the sword tightly while glared at the wolves.

"How... To think you are here." After seeing the sword, Glenn slowly stood up while shaking his head in annoyance.

"Tsk... I guess I could just do nothing and leave the rest to you?" Glenn holstered his pistol and said after turning his back to the coachman.

The coachmen's head slightly turned and glanced at Glenn. Although both eyes are obscured by the hood, one can see the corners of the mouth upturned, revealing a slight smile.

At that moment, the coachman suddenly vanished from sight, leaving a few blades of grass fluttering in the wind.

Kyaa! Kyuu!?

Two shadow wolves collapsed onto the ground, letting out a final cry as they fell. The coachman stood nearby, seemingly at the end of a sword swing, but even that was a mere afterimage.

Kyaa!!

At the blink of an eye, a pained cry followed the collapse of another wolf.

The attacks were incredibly fast, so much so that even the sound of the swing could barely be heard.

"W-what exactly is happening?!"

The shadow wolves that stood in a circle were cut down one after another in a counterclockwise fashion - a scene that could only be described as a one-sided slaughter. The coachman would seemingly vanish from one corner of the eye only to reappear at the other. Sistina could barely keep up with the coachman's movements and occasional flash of reflected light from the sword. Even the monsters barely had enough time to comprehend the events that unfolded.

One by one they fell.

The spectacle was as if Death had descended upon the battlefield, striking down all who dared to stand against it with lightning precision. Yet, this time, Death took on the appearance of a lowly coachman.

Kyaa?!

After losing two-thirds of their number, the shadow wolves have

finally realized how terrifying of an opponent they were facing. They took advantage their superior teamwork and surrounded the coachman, launching an attack from all sides. As their claws and teeth approached, the coachmen turned slightly, raised the sword, and... A flash of light.

Kyuuuaa!!

Four streaks of silver flew through the air at the same time, and the four wolves that leapt were cut into pieces.

"I-Incredible! W-what amazing skill!"

The coachman's swordsmanship was strong, fast, and ferocious. The concise strikes that delivered the maximum damage were exemplary of the swordsmanship practiced by knights of the previous era. At the same time, the footwork and sword skills were frequently seen as simplistic, inflexible, and lacking in diversity in the modern era. However, the coachman was able to use those sword skills to their maximum potential, a clear reflection of the tens upon tens of thousands of hours that went into its polish, turning a simplistic move into a terrifying weapon. Before the raw power, all the skills of all the styles could be seen as naught but child's play.

"I have never seen such strong sword skills in my life before..." Sistine could not help but become entranced by the coachman's movements.

"Silly, that isn't a sword skill. That is magic." Glenn said while leaning on the carriage with his hands behind his head.

"Ah? Magic?"

"Modified White Magic [Load•Experience]... A spell that taps into the accumulated memories of an object, and lend it to its user." Glenn calmly explained as he watched the coachman clear out the monsters, "That sword was once the beloved partner of the strongest swordswoman in imperial history. That person is reading the memory that lay dormant within the sword, and as of such, temporarily borrowing the experience that belonged to the sword's

original owner."

"What are you talking about?"

"At the current moment, that person cannot be defeated, at least not with the sword in hand. Unless, perhaps, the person was matched against the original owner of the sword."

Sistine was rendered speechless by the explanation.

Certainly, white magic that lets a person tap into the experience of another does exist.

But that was basically 'white ritualistic magic' - a form of ritual magic. It was a highly difficult spell that required complicated preparations and extraordinary efforts to activate.

What Glenn said earlier was 'Modified White Magic [Load•Experience]'. If my guess is correct, the three-phrase chant I have heard earlier was probably the activation of the spell.

It was hard to believe that the coachman used merely three phrases to activate the equivalent of a spell that require others extensive rituals to perform. The magic was likely known as a modified spell because, despite knowing the theories, no other can replicate it - a magic no different in essence from sorcery.

"Umm... Who exactly is that coachman?!"

"Ah? You still haven't figured it out yet? There is only one who can pull off a stunt as absurd as that."

The coachman blew by the final shadow wolf like a bolt of lightning, and unhesitantly skewered the monster with the sword. Not sure if it was the final display of the monster's strong will, or a mere coincidence, the claw of the last shadow wolf tore through the hood of the coachman before it collapsed in its own pool of blood.

At the other end of the exchange, the tattered hood was blown away by the breeze, revealing a dazzling golden hair. The hair that

shone like the golden wheat fields at dusk entranced the spectators and deeply ingrained itself in their minds.

"Ah..." Sistine could not help but gasp as her eyes opened wide at the sight.

Under the robe was a long jet black gothic dress, the beautiful figure was surprisingly familiar.

"Oops, I have been found out. What a blunder, and here I hoped to keep you all guessing for a while longer." The coachman muttered as she sheathed her longsword.



"P-Professor Arfonia?! W-why are you here?!"

"Heh, greetings."

The coachman - no coachwoman, Celica Arfonia turned to greet everyone with a smile.

For some reason, Celica swapped herself with the hired coachman.

"Sorry, I did not intentionally bring you all here to scare you. It is just that cutting through here will allow you to arrive at the Taum Observatory sooner, even I didn't think there would be monsters nearby. Again, sorry everyone, I have brought unnecessary trouble to you all." Celica got all the apologies out of the way, and then, "Just a head's up, Glenn, I also want to go check the Observatory out, so let me tag along, alright?"

Not sure why, Celica also wanted to go along with the group.

"But of course, I won't get in your way. You are the leader of the team, so just think of me as one of the members." Celica let out a mischievous smile, no one could understand her intentions. "Either way, I am a renowned seventh-ranked magician, so be sure to take advantage of my abilities~"

However, there was no reason to refuse. When one considers the dangers of the trip, having the continent's strongest magician nearby is never a bad idea. One thing led to another, and Celica soon joined the expedition.

"Really, what is she really up to? What is she plotting?" Glenn mumbled as he took over for Celica as the carriage driver, "I bet she definitely has something nasty planned."

"D-don't need to be so suspicious of others, you know~!" Lumia, who sat next to Glenn in the driver's seat, let out a wry smile, "I'm sure it is because Professor Arfonia was worried about you."

"Hmph, fat chance!" Glenn irritably looked at Lumia, "That

person is even more quirky than me, both in terms of selfishness and impulsiveness. If something doesn't pique her interest, she probably won't bother with it even if the world is to end."

"I-is that so...?"

"Mm." Glenn shuddered at the thought, "That person didn't think twice to taking out the memento of her best friend, and her only wish is to tag along? D-definitely not! I bet she have some terrible secret she cannot share with us!"

"Hahaha..." As Lumia laughed, Glenn took a glimpse at the back.
And the problem doesn't just end there...

Glenn looked through the small glass window to see the situation within the carriage. He was correct, Celica's participation brought about other issues as well.

Within the carriage, an awkward scene was unfolding.

Dear father, mother, are you both well? Right now, the atmosphere in the carriage is really terrible.

Sistine let out a sigh.

At the height of noon, the bright light made sitting on the upper deck exhausting, so all of the students were tucked away in the lower deck. Of course, Sistine was sitting at one corner of the carriage.

W-why is someone as famous as Professor Arfonia with us?

T-that living legend... Is currently travelling with us? Are you kidding?!

S-so nervous.

All the students were sitting as far away from Celica as possible, appearing petrified at the sight of her. Sadly, this wasn't anything unusual. After all, all the students know of the strongest magician of the empire, Celica Arfonia, was a professor at the Alzano Imperial Magic Academy. They all seen her around the academy, and

were all well aware of her relationship with her only pupil, Glenn.

However, beyond the confines of the academy, there were many rumors regarding Celica, both good and bad. Within their history books alone, Celica's name was mentioned more than once, but all of the stories sounded more like fantasy than reality. According to one story, she was the hero who participated in the Great Magic War two hundred years ago and wiped out the demon-worshipping cultists. In another story, she was a mass murderer that cleansed an entire city of life. On the other hand, she was treated as the imperial army's strategic weapon, the 'Ashen Witch'. While in another, she was told to be the reincarnation of an ancient Demon Lord. Countless of such rumors and stories circulated around Celica.

Additionally, despite being a professor, Celica had no teaching duties at the academy and rarely interacted with students. Her beautiful yet cool visage could only be described as flawless, but at the same time gave off a sense of chill, making her difficult to approach.

For such an awe-inspiring figure to be suddenly thrust into their midst and now travelling with them, it was to no one's surprise that the students would act so mindful of her. Kash and Gibul pretended to be calm in front of the girls, Wendy and the other girls were trying to sit as far away as possible, while Lynn was so frightened that she took to hiding behind Teresa. Unlike their encounter with the emotionless Riel, the powerful presence of Celica has drawn an impassible chasm between the students and her. Other than Lumia, Sistine, and Riel who had connections to Celica through Glenn, the other students were completely frozen by her presence.

Hey, Celica, they are completely petrified. You really need to do something about it!

Glenn surveyed the room nervously through the small window.



Celica, however, just continued to casually flip through her book, completely oblivious to the fearful stares around her.

"Umm... P-Professor Arfonia?" Sistine tried to strike up a conversation with Celica, attempting to clear up the stagnant air. "So, Professor. W-what brings you to the ruins this time?"

Celica withdrew her vision from the book at hand, and looked to the front, her eyes met with those of Glenn.

U-ugh! Glenn quickly shrunk back.

Celica let out a small chuckle at Glenn's antics, "Nothing much~ Just a bit of willful thinking, I guess." And returned her focus to the book.

"W-willful thinking?"

"Yes, just willful thinking." Celica was clearly evasive in her answer, tinged with a hint of 'refusal'.

"Ah, I see..." To have the conversation suddenly cut short, Sistine was left in a quandary.

"O-oh right! Professor, I have a question for you!"

"...Hmm?"

"When you defeated the monsters earlier, why did you decide to use a sword? If I were in Professor's shoes, I would believe it to be easier to take them out with magic."

"...? No, that is... If I were to use an attack spell then, won't all of you be blown away as well? Not to mention the changes that would have been made on the geography and spirit veins." Celica answered in a sober tone.

Uncertain of how much exaggeration was involved in the answer, the visibly shaken Sistine kept the conversation going.

"B-but still, for a single person to be able to defeat so many,

Professor Arfonia really is amazing! We were completely awestruck!"

"Hahaha~ Fibel, have you not heard the rumors about me?"

"Hmm?"

"If I remember correctly, the story went that Celica Arfonia single-handedly wiped out tens of thousands of imperial army. Compared to that time, the wolves this time were all small fries... Hehehe~"

"Huh? Ah? T-those rumors are real?!"

"...Who knows~ What do you think?" Celica gave a vague response, followed by a mischievous laugh.

Uwa... The plan backfired...

Sistine held her head and let out a deep sigh.

Celica's elusive demeanor was nothing unusual, and was simply a normal facet of her being. However, her casual remarks earlier made the students fear her even more. No matter how outlandish the 'rumors' were, they always gain an air of validity around Celica, and some were even turned to 'truths'... Such was her unfathomable strength. Of course, Celica knew this well, and used it to tease the students.

"Hehehe..." Celica revealed a devious smile as she looked around the students.

T-this woman, seriously!

Like teacher like pupil. No matter what anyone says on the contrary, Celica was indeed very similar to Glenn.

W-what to do now...?

While Sistine was searching deep in her mind for a countermeasure...

"Hmm? Celica?" Riel broke the silence that enveloped the

carriage.

Riel, who was huddled at the corner of the carriage, rose from her slumber and rubbed her sleepy eyes. She has finally awoken, and took note of Celica's presence.

"Oh? You are coming along?" Riel effortlessly leapt across to Celica's side and got close to her face.

Riel had always held an interest in Celica, a somewhat of a mystery to many. By the time Riel joined the Imperial Court Mage Corps, Celica had already left. As of such, the two never met each other face to face. However, after meeting her through Glenn, Riel became weirdly attached to Celica. When asked, Riel's answer was always, "For some reason, Celica doesn't feel like a stranger... Not sure why."

"Ah, I'll be tagging along. Please take care of me." Celica smiled as she rubbed Riel's head.

Riel doesn't seem to dislike the pat, and just meekly received the rub.

"Is that so... What are you reading?"

Riel's interest has quickly shifted to the book in Celica's hand.

"This book? It is a fairy tale called the 'Sorcerer of Melgalius'."

The vivid colors that once illustrated the printed page have long since become dull, while the letters that recounts the tales was blurred at places. Although just a fairy tale, the binding of the book looked ornate, and the large number of pages gave a weighty feel. Given the ample amount of illustrations within, one can perfectly refer to it as a picture book.

"Hmm? *With his left hand wielding red magic that negate all magic, and his right hand wielding black magic that consume souls, he completed the thirteen trials of Lady Midnight and obtained thirteen lives - Lord Al Khan of the Shimmering Blades.*" Riel squinted her eyes and read from the book. "*In the end, even*

the Demon Lord could not avoid the exchange of blows..., what is this about?"

"That is the climax of the prologue to the 'Sorcerer of Melgalius'." Sistine passionately cut into the conversation. "The protagonist of the story, the 'Sorcerer of Justice', doesn't appear until the second chapter. Prior to the second chapter, the story detailed how the Demon Lord gathered his lieutenants and built the Sky Castle. Of his lieutenants, Al Khan of the Shimmering Blades was the key character of the prologue."

"Oh, you seem to be strangely well informed." Celica gazed upon Sistine with impressed eyes.

"Huh? Ah, yes. For us Sky Castle otakus, the book is a very important source of reference."

The fairy tale 'Sorcerer of Melgalius'. Atop the Sky Castle, the sorcerer of justice would come to defeat the Demon Lord who tormented the people, rescue an imprisoned princess, and bring happiness to all. It was clearly a story written for children, but the narrative contained many fantastical and mysterious elements, as well as detailed description of the protagonist's emotions and thoughts. Furthermore, no details were spared for even for the Demon Lord and his subordinates. With its ensemble cast, even adults could find appreciation for the story within.

"This is not a simple fairy tale. Its author, Rolan Etruria, went to great lengths to collect the folk tales and songs from all over the empire, and using his own insight, compiled the greatest collection of ancient myths." Celica let out a laugh and raised the book up, "This was Glenn's favorite book from when he was a child. I originally thought about bringing a book along for the journey to kill some time, and after searching through the bookshelves, I saw this book, and feeling nostalgic, I..."

"Ah?" Sistine was startled by Celica's words, "T-that was really a surprise. I didn't think the teacher would enjoy this story of all things.

And here I thought teacher who shouted 'magic is but a tool for killing' at the top of his lungs would find a story like this childish."

"Well, he did encounter some trauma in his life. It is not wrong to say that magic is a tool for killing, but that is not all magic is good for. He knows it in his hearts." Celica wryly smiled with a shrug.

"When he was young, he used to love magic. He would read this book and proudly declare 'When I grow up, I want to also be a Sorcerer of Justice!' Despite how he is now, there was a time when he was cute like that."

"Teacher..."

Before, Glenn mentioned he always wanted to become a 'Sorcerer of Justice'.

"Speaking of which, Professor Arfonia is Teacher's mentor and foster mother right? What was teacher like when he was a child?" Sistine spontaneously asked, "I-I do not mean anything by that question. J-just a little bit curious, that is all! Aah, why is it becoming so awkward!!"

Sistine did not know why she was feeling envious toward Celica for her knowledge about the unfamiliar side of Glenn. Sistine was still too naïve, and did not recognize her jealousy.

"Hmm... Let me think..." Celica took a quick glance at the surrounding students.

The students were as nervous as always, but they all seemed to have an interest in Glenn's childhood, and were secretly peeking at Celica. Celica kindly gazed at the students, and closed her book with a plop.

"He was an innocent and sincere child, so much so that he frequently made me feel I was not good enough to be his mother..." With eyes full of nostalgia, Celica spoke as she watched the scenery through the window.

Celica began recounting the old days, although her story felt

quite fragmented. Ten years ago, while still serving as a magician of the Imperial Court Mage Corps, Celica adopted the homeless Glenn purely on a whim, and have lived together with him since. To care for Glenn, Celica left the Mage Corps, and because she was unfamiliar with normal life, ended up frequently being cared by Glenn in reverse. The time when Celica decided to cook for Glenn and, when Glenn cried 'It doesn't taste good' while on the verge of tears, would vow to improve her own cooking. The time when Celica believed a man should be strong, and taught Glenn martial arts and magic. While Glenn showed promise in martial arts, he would be troubled by his lack of talent in magic, and cause Celica much worry in return. There was also the time when Glenn would perform magic experiments, and the sparkle seen in his eye as he eagerly awaited the results.

They were long and peaceful days.

Yet, the two would frequently bicker because of misunderstandings.

"But despite it all, that kind of mundane life... was very precious to me."

On a certain day, Glenn suddenly decided to give Celica a gift, calling it her birthday present. Because Celica did not know her own birthday, and never held a particular interest, Glenn unilaterally decided upon her birthday, reflective of his innocent self.

"And, this was the present from that time." Celica took out a pendent with an unshapely red stone seated within, "It was a red magic crystal created through the alchemy I had just taught him, and after making a few random cuts, hanged it on a string and turned it into a pendant. The crystal's purity was very low, and lacked any magical value, a complete piece of junk."

And yet, Celica carried the supposed piece of junk close to her like a treasure.

"Really, it is quite troubling to receive a gift like this, as I couldn't really wear it openly. All in all, that bastard's way of interacting with females really needs improvement. But, not sure why... at that time... I..."

Celica shut her eyes and tightly clenching the stone.

Whenever Celica would talk about Glenn, her tone was calm and her words would just naturally flow out. However, this also showed how much she cared for Glenn as a mother and as a mentor.

"...Mm. Actually, let's leave it at that." Celica abruptly ended her thought at that point.

Like the glittering gem, the story of his joyful childhood came to an end.

After that, Glenn used 'Graduation' as an excuse and left the Magic Academy, joining the Imperial Court Mage Corps.

"As what came after concerns his dignity, I won't go into too much detail. In summary, Glenn experienced all sorts of misfortune during his times in the Mage Corps, and soon fell deep into depression. One can even say that he lost the will to live..." Celica had a complicated expression, and was conflicted for what to say, "So, I would really like to thank you all."

Celica suddenly revealed a smile at the listening students, almost as if a ray of warm sunlight illuminating a field of golden what, a complete change from her usual cold demeanor. So much so that it was hard to believe the person sitting before them was the one who was the subject of all sorts of terrifying rumors - a legend with countless achievements. Celica's action made the students forgetting to breathe momentarily, only blinking blankly at the sight.

"It is thanks to you all that Glenn could once again be in a good enough spirit to do all those foolish things. As it was always just me by his side, and no matter what I did to nurture and protect him, I

was unable to help him recover. Therefore, thank you."

And so Celica finished retelling the life of Glenn, and opened her book to read once again. As indicated by her actions, no words came out from her since. The gentle breeze blowing through the half-opened window lifted Celica's beautiful hair.

Now that they had warmed up to Celica, the students, including Sistine, Wendy, Lynn and the others came to realize: That demon-like, rumored, feared, and terrifying Celica was at her core, the same as the students - a simple human being.

"Ah? A-although I am not sure how it happened, the atmosphere has improved a lot!" Glenn, who was peeking through the driver's window, commented.

The tense air that had enveloped the entire carriage has now dissipated. Lynn and Cecil have also relaxed. Kash and Wendy still isn't their usual self, but at least began to have some small talk with Celica. Whenever a question was asked, Celica would close her book and patiently reply.

It seemed all of this happened after Celica made that long talk. Sadly, with how loud the horse and the carriage are, I wasn't able to clearly hear the details from the driver's seat...

"But that is just fine... I-I do not care about the topic one bit!" Glenn held a complicated expression as he turned to face the front.

"I bet it is because everyone realized Professor Arfonia isn't a scary person at all after hearing all she had to say."

"...Really, the students are too easily scared!"

After hearing Lumia's assessment, Glenn let out a grunt.

"Certainly, she is always aloof, and foolish, and willful, and foolish, and mischievous, and foolish, and hard to understand, and foolish, and have all those weird rumors, then using all those rumors to prank people, and impossibly foolish... I think that summarized her

up well." Glenn suddenly blurted out. "But, how to say this... Sometimes she is really kind, and took me in to raise me into the man I am today... Additionally, while I hate to admit, as a magician, she is incredibly powerful..."

But the more Glenn said, the less the words flew, and soon it devolved into a tangled mess.

"Either way, if it weren't for her, I would have ditched that tiny house a long time ago..." Glenn shrugged his shoulders and mercilessly remarked.

"Hehehe..." Glenn's words elicited a slight chuckle from Lumia.

"W-what is so funny?"

"N-no, it's just that... I feel that teacher really treasures Professor Arfonia."

"Huh...?!"

Lumia's sincere words made Glenn unable to retort.

"For your important person to be treated so distantly by others, it must have been quite sad."

"W-... w-what?!"

"Teacher is really worried about the Professor, so..."

"W-what are you talking about? Don't be absurd! She would never care about some pointless matter like this! And..." Glenn was like a little kid, tossing out excuses after excuses in denial of his feelings.

Lumia continued to look at Glenn with her caring eyes.

The carriage travelled west on the rolling grasslands.



At the point when the sun was at the distant horizon, the travellers have finally seen silhouette of the ruins. As the sun slowly set, above them was a beautiful pomegranate-colored sky, and at a distance

was the crimson peaks of the mountain range, with the shimmering lake at the foot of the mountains. Below their foot was a vast grassland dyed red by the setting sun.

Situated on a pedestal closest to the sky, surrounded by imposing cliffs on all sides, sat the observatory.

"So that's the 'Taum Observatory'." Sistine stared intently at the observatory, seemingly overcome with emotions.

And it was not limited to just Sistine, all the students who glimpsed upon the observatory found themselves being pressured by the mysterious yet awe-inspiring sight.

"Hey, what are you all zoning out for?" Glenn clapped his hand, snapped the students out of their trance, and began to give orders.

"The official investigation will begin tomorrow, and we will need to establish a camp. The boys will be in charge of setting up the tents. Lynn and Teresa will take care of dinner. Celica, please set up wards on the perimeter of the camp, just in case. White Cat and Wendy will also help Celica with the wards. Lumia will tend to the horse. Riel will be tasked with sentry duty, and check if there are any dangerous monsters nearby. Feel free to kill any that you find. Is everyone clear about their duties? If so, then I..." After his exemplary display of leadership, Glenn laid down flat on the ground, "Will take a nap... So sleepy... Be sure to wake me once dinner is ready. Good night everyone."

"What are •You •Doing!!"

"Uwaaa?!"

Sistine spontaneously casted the Modified Black Magic [Gale •Blow] and blew Glenn away.

"Why are you making •Everyone else do all the work •Seriously!"

"I'm sorry! It's my fault! I'm really sorry! I won't do it again...Uwaaa!! Please, not electri-... Gah!!"

A huge spectacle took place.

"..."

Celica's caring gaze followed Glenn, and revealed a gentle smile, and then turned to the observatory.

"...'Taum Observatory', if it's here, then maybe..." Celica quietly muttered to herself.

Her face showed an unusually stern look.

At the same time, in a certain place.

"You have come, Celica..."

In the darkness, a certain presence also muttered to itself.



Chapter 3: Memories of the Stars

Under the crumbling starry night.

I reminisced as I sprinted down the endless 'Corridor of Stars' alone, of the days after my initial contact with this world.

...

...After I first woke up, I heard a 'Voice', one that told me that I need to fulfill my mission.

Yes, I have come to a realization.

Even if my mind does not remember, my soul would surely do. I was certain that there was something I needed to accomplish before I lost my memories. It was something incredibly important to me, even more than my very life. But the funny thing was, no matter how much time have passed, I could not remember my purpose.

But, my troubles did not stop there, and I soon learned of a greater torment.

I was... immortal.

I chanced upon the realization of my unique circumstances when I examined my magic. My body would not age. Even though I had all the normal biological functions, my time was completely frozen - a paradox in and of itself. The reasons were unknown, the theoretical basis was unknown, and of course, I have had no idea myself. As if I was a dancing in the palm of some greater power, where 'until I remembered and completed my mission, I was not permitted to die'."

Immortality, one of the ultimate goals of the magicians who

sought the truth of the world. But it was not limited to just magicians, anyone would have had such dreams and aspirations. Yet, the reality was very different.

I was not sure whether it was disgust at my unnatural existence, or the jealousy and envy for the existence seemingly superior to them. Whenever I was discovered to be an immortal, everyone would drift away and grow distant to me. The one that had declared his eternal love and vowed to stay with me till the end of days would curse me as 'not a human, but a monster' and abandon me. The stinging stares and persecution would converge upon my undying body. I would slowly grow angry, fatigued, and stagnant.

Despite all this, there were still some, albeit quite few, people who were willing to stay by my side. Unlike me, they were all humans - ones unable to resist the flow of time, slowly age, and then finally...

After dozens of years passed since my awakening, I stood before their graves with a bundle of flowers in hand, looking not a day older than when I first arrived in this world. As always, I have not changed at all.

"D-darn it..."

Crack.

At that moment, a part of my heart broke.



The second day after their arrival at the ruins.

Glenn quickly applied himself to the investigation of the observatory.

Leaving nothing to chance, Cecil, Lynn, and a few other students were ordered to stay behind at their warded off camp, to serve as back-up and ensure communication in case of emergencies. Glenn took the lead and entered the observatory's large gothic doors. The light did not reach far into the interior, and the group was soon enveloped by the darkness. The entire ruins was actually

carved out of a single mass of stone, and its mysterious design made the structure impossible to receive any outside light. As of such, Glenn, who was at the head of the column, needed to keep his index finger lit with Black Magic [Touch•Light] to illuminate the path ahead as they walked. However, they were not alone at the ruins.

"I-I didn't hear anything about this! Wasn't it suppose to be a safe ruins?!"

"We will discuss later. For now, we need to get ready for a fight! Here they come!!"

"Darn it! This better be the only encounter!"

There was some presences floating in midair ahead of them, and were rapidly approaching the group. Some took on the shadowy figure of a human, some looked liked small fairies with wings, and some looked like ghosts. All sorts of specters were attacking Glenn and the others.

"Tsk! Ah, what was it again?! I-... *I am the shooter•The root of power...!!*"

"M-m-... *M-Magic•Bullet!!*"

Compared to Kash, Wendy, and the others, who were startled by the sudden onslaught and were unable to even enunciate their spells correctly...

"[Magic•Bullet, Ein]! And again, [Zwei]! And a third, [Drei]!" Sistine swiftly unleashed a chain casting of Black Magic [Magic•Bullet].

The magic bullets gathered on her fingers pierced through one specter after another. In a sharp explosion, the damaged specter dissipated into the air.

"I-... *I am the shooter•The root of power•Gather at my fingers!*" The other students, seemingly encouraged by Sistine, overcame their nervousness and successfully completed their chants to defend against the specters.

"Hmph!"

And so, after Sistine and the others pierced the specters with a hail of bullets, they were then slashed apart by Riel, who was lying in wait with her large alchemized sword.

After a few moments, they successfully defended against the specters' onslaught. Not a single attacker remained, and the surrounding air returned to its normal calm.

"Haa... W-we won...?" Glenn tried to calm the tense students.

"Ahaha~ not bad, not bad at all! You kids are pretty strong."

At the far end of the column, Celica clapped her hand as she observed the battle while leaning on the nearby wall.

"Leaving the students to fend for themselves, you are a real piece of work, you know...?" Glenn finally relaxed after nervously watching over the students during the encounter.

"You are pampering them too much, Glenn." Unlike the restless Glenn, Celica was surprisingly calm, "How could my star pupil's students be defeated by the likes of those? That and, even if they are just fledgling magicians, the students are more than capable of handling themselves."

"B-but..."

"Not to worry, and don't forget, I am also here. If there is any risk of injury, I will instantly leap in to help. Despite their combat practice at school, they never got to experience any real battles, right? These trashes provide the perfect opportunity."

"Yes, that makes sense. But..." Glenn suddenly turned to where the specters came out, "Darn it, to think this site still had malevolent spirits within..."

Malevolent spirits. Affected by abnormalities within spirit veins, they were the fairies and spirits that had gone mad, essentially the result of a perfectly natural phenomenon. Once they are

maddened, they would treat all approaching individuals as enemies.

"It is nothing unusual. They are easy to appear in ruins like this. Don't forget, most ancient ruins are built close to spirit veins. Either way, it looks like the fights against the malevolent spirits will continue on for some time."

"Seriously, what about this is F-ranked? How long was this site neglected?!"

"Do not worry, after this expedition, this site may need to be bumped up a difficulty rank or two." Celica playfully looked at Glenn, "Aren't you glad that I am here with you guys? Otherwise you probably planned to just call quits, right?"

"Hmph! Whatever."

For phantasmal beings like spirits and fairies which have gained its body through magic power, elemental spells such as flame, ice, or electricity were relatively ineffective. To defeat them, it is necessary to directly disrupt its magic flow. As of such, they would have to rely on Black Magic [Magic•Bullet] and other non-elemental attack spells, where the magician would gather their magic power before shooting it out. In the eastern lands, such spells were commonly referred to as 'Chi'.

To be honest, Glenn has the worst affinity with the non-elemental spells. From a gender standpoint, males generally excelled at magic control, while females tend to have a greater magic reservoir. However, despite being male, Glenn was very poor at magic control, which matched poorly with non-elemental spells that tend to require precise magic control. As of such, Glenn was a poor combatant for wherever there were to be a large gathering of malevolent spirits.

Certainly, using the Black Magic [Weapon•Enchant] and fortifying fists for combat was always an option, but from purely the standpoint of efficiency, the ability to chant shortened version of

Black Magic [Magic•Bullet] like Sistine and picking them off at a distance was preferred.

To be able to leave the fighting to the students was undoubtedly thanks to the presence of Celica in the rear, who would cover for the students should any danger arise.

"Sure, sure. I am just a useless trash. I leave the students in your care, o' esteemed master... Hmph." Glenn grumbled and then turned away.

Celica could only laugh at Glenn's childish tantrum.

While the master and pupil were having their exchange, another conversation went on elsewhere.

"Hey, Sistine. You seemed to have gotten much stronger!"

"Oh? Really?"

Kash exclaimed after coming over to Sistine.

"Yeah, how to put it. When the enemy suddenly attacked earlier, you were very calm and didn't seem to be scared at all. Were you really not afraid?"

"I-... I was actually quite scared. Ahaha~"

...But compared to the time with Jatice.

"Speaking of which, you were also very calm when we were attacked by the shadow wolves earlier."

"Ah? Really? I was really scared at that time! Honestly!" After hearing Wendy's words, Sistine hastily retorted.

"And, Sistine was really strong! To be able to use chain chanting, when did you learn how to do that?"

"Oh, that? I-I wonder when...? Ahaha~"

Lumia's sincere question made Sistine felt a little bit guilty inside, her forehead began to sweat a little.

"Ugh! D-don't think you are better than me because of this!"

"Hmph~"

Wendy and Gibul both glared at Sistine with displeased eyes.

Not long ago, the difference in ability between Sistine, Wendy, and Gibul were negligible. But before anyone noticed, Sistine had pulled away and created a massive gap between her and the other two, making it difficult for the two to accept.

"Then, we must work hard to catch up... Hmm?"

As they chatted away, the malevolent spirits once again approached from darkness.

"Another group? W-wait, aren't there a few too many of them this time?! Won't it turn bad like this?!"

"Let's see who can take out more, Sistine! I definitely won't lose this time!"

The students became pumped for combat, but...

"No, wait!" This time, Celica moved in front of the students, "You guys should take a rest this time. After all, you are likely still exhausted from the previous encounter. If you keep pushing yourselves like this, you may suffer mana insufficiency~ Just leave them to me."

"B-but Professor, aren't there too many of them...?" Sistine worriedly watched the approach attackers.

As Sistine has indicated, there were a very large number of them, rushing over to attack. Likely, they were attracted by the noise of the earlier fight.

"To just leave them all to you feels a bit excessive, perhaps it's better if everyone..."

"Don't worry about it, and it is the perfect opportunity to give you guys a demonstration. In times like these..." As Celica confidently exclaimed, a sharp pop came from her fingers.

And then another pop...

All of a sudden, dozens of [Magic•Bullet] appeared around Celica.

""?!"

"Go." Celica just pointed at the road ahead, countless magic bullets flew down the path while drawing a bright line, almost like a stunning meteor shower, and cut down the approaching malevolent spirits.

"" ...

A complete slaughter. All the students were stunned by the scene.

"Mm. And this is how you do it, understand?"

"H-how could anyone..."

"This is really... beyond any reason..."

Kash and Sistine were rendered speechless.

They were all well aware that Celica was on a completely different plane of existence as them, but only after witnessing her magic up close did they once again understand just how big a gap really existed.



Glenn and the others continued down the path, occasionally punctuated by encounters with malevolent spirits.

"Teacher, the path branches up ahead. We need to take a left at that branch, and we will reach our first site of investigation: the First Ritual Chamber."

"Mm, got it."

Lumia looked at the complete map made by the previous expedition, and guided Glenn along.

The 'Taum Observatory' as shown by the map was quite expansive.

From the map, this ruins seemed to be a construct of some ancient religion. It has ritual chambers, a prayer chambers, observatories, sanctuaries, and a large planetarium. These rooms are set three-dimensionally within the hemispherical structure, and connected through labyrinthine passageways and stairs.

To think that the entire structure was carved from a single stone, and not only that, the path under their feet showed no signs of corners cut. Just bringing the light close easily revealed that, regardless if it's the ceiling, the floor, or the walls, everything was perfectly polished. Additionally, the ceiling and the walls were completely covered with compactly placed etchings and pictures. The time and effort spent by the ancients to construct this observatory were unfathomable.

"But, teacher, doesn't it feel a bit odd?" Lumia inquired Glenn after moving up through the column, "This observatory, while it did look massive from the outside, the inside felt even larger. Could they really fit this many chambers within?"

Lumia inquisitively looked at the map on hand, thinking perhaps the excitement while inside the structure has dulled her sense of size.

"Hehehe~ Lumia, actually..." Sistine was about to answer Lumia when...

"The space here is warped." Celica, who was walking next to Glenn, hijacked the conversation.

"Take a look at the design on the floor and ceiling, it is a common design for ruins within the empire," Celica gently ran her finger along the etched markings, "and it seemed to be a spell used by the ancients for the distortion of the space."

"Hmm? 'Seemed'? As in, we aren't really sure?"

"The reason why we are still unsure is that we have no way of deciphering the mechanism of ancient magic with our modern theories. As of such, we could only conclude that these markings

represent some sort of magic."

"Umm... So even Professor Arfonia have no way of deciphering the magic?"

"Mm. As far as ancient magic is concerned, even I am completely ignorant." Celica shrugged her shoulders.

After having her chance to show off snatched by Celica, Sistine was seething from behind.

"In conclusion, because of these etchings, the space within the observatory became warped, creating an area larger than it seemed at first glance. Even without knowing the theories behind it, the truth is quite evident, or so it goes."

"Although I don't quite understand what you are talking about," Riel entered into the conversation, "won't it be simpler if we just blow a hole through the wall and cut across?"

As Riel said such dangerous things, she shifted the large sword on her shoulder.

"Hahaha~ That's interesting, but not possible."

"Hmm? Why?"

Riel tilted her head sideways in confusion, and Celica kindly began her explanation,

"The ancient ruins and the articles within had already been applied Etherio Coating, and the 'Taum Observatory' was no different. As of such, everything was made to be completely impervious to any physical or magical altercations, be it Riel's strength or my [Extinction•Ray] will only render harmless against the structure. It is also why I made you alchemize your swords outside the ruins."

"Is that so? While I am not sure about all that details you mentioned, it's regrettable."

Etherio Coating. A sorcerous property that completely baffled

modern magicians, one of the great mystery of ancient magic.

"This is why, despite the thousands of years, this ruins could still remain in pristine shape." And then, Celica indignantly threw up her hair, "Bastards... If it weren't for this annoying coating, I would have done in that lousy Underground Labyrinth long-..."

Not a single person heard Celica's muttering.

"S-such amazing technology... How incredible are these ancients? Were they really humans like us?"

"No, no! About the identity of those ancients, there are many theories! Such as..."

"Hey! Don't get overconfident! Don't forget we are still on the expedition!"

After hearing Lumia's new question, Sistine hurriedly answered, only to be cut short by Glenn.



As they chatted, they traversed a few more passageways, made a few turns, wiped out a few groups of interloping malevolent spirits, and finally arrived at their destination.

"Finally. So this is the first ritual chamber."

The end of the passageway was a gothic door which opened up to an expansive chamber.

Glenn prepared his revolver, and turned to his students. The gun was now fully loaded with magically enhanced bullets, and therefore would be effective even against malevolent spirits.

"Umm, while I do not think there are any threats ahead, for safe measures, I will scout ahead first. Everyone, just wait here for a moment."

"Hmph! To brave the danger for the sake of your students, aren't you the cool one, Glenn~?" Celica let out a mischievous chuckle, and poked fun at Glenn.

"If I don't do at least this much, then I would definitely become a complete burden on this expedition."

"Are you sure you will be fine alone? If you are afraid, I can always go with you."

"Shut it! I'm not a kid anymore!"

"Ah, t-then, teacher, please be safe."

After giving a strong nod to the worried Lumia, Glenn marched forth.

Upon entering through the gothic doors, Glenn was greeted by a large hemispheric chamber. The floor, wall, and ceiling were thoroughly polished, a constant reminder of how the entire structure was carved out of a single rock. Etched on the surfaces were mysterious drawings that were akin to star charts used by diviners. One could make out the lines that demarcate the ecliptic and the lunar orbit, the sun and the moon, as well as the planets and the stars. The entire chamber gave off the feeling of a mini-replica of the universe.

At the center of the room lay an altar stacked from countless rectangular stones, capped by the statue of a seemingly divine existence. The depiction of the statue seemed to be of a pair of angels entwined together, an existence known as...

"Twins of the Sky, Taum."

This type of astrological religion, who practiced astral worship, was a common one among the many denominations of ancient's religion.

According to Glenn's prior research, the ancient civilization, or rather, ancient people believed that the sky have a will of its own, and have been awestruck by it, deified it, and worshipped it. Considering all of this, it was no wonder that for such a ritual chamber, there would be an accurate and easy to understand star chart etched in meticulous detail, where even a layperson

could understand. At its center, the 'Twins of the Sky, Taum' was the supreme deity of the ancient astrological religion, goddesses that represented the 'Heavens'.

"But still, why would they worship something as silly as the sky? Never know what went on in those ancients' minds." Although Glenn spat out some disrespectful words, he nevertheless was stunned by a mysterious sense of pressure in the ritual chamber.

Suddenly, Glenn experienced a weird sensation. A knife-like chill crept up his back as his heart was gripped by a feeling of tightness. His vision narrowed and his ears became deaf.

"W-what?"

When Glenn first entered the ritual chamber, that 'thing' wasn't there, or rather, it shouldn't be there. It was a sizable existence that shouldn't have gone unnoticed. A small girl unwittingly descended before the statue of the twin angels. There she sat, as if waiting for someone to come.

Her hair ashen white, and her eyes shone like red coral with a dark hue, all the while dressed in a thinly veiled dress. On her back was some sort of warped, things, which mildly resembled wings. Things that looked like a jumbled mess of eyes and eels, the very sight of which made Glenn disturbed.

Yet the girl's face was very human and very beautiful, which when juxtaposed to the revolting wings, elicited only feelings of utter disgust and rejection. As the image of that abnormally-shaped girl entered Glenn's eyes, he felt his soul becoming invaded, evoking a sense of insanity.

Under the glow of the light emitted from Glenn's fingertip, that girl slowly floated up into the air.

"Long time no see, Glenn." The girl gazed at Glenn and said.

Her voice was sharp as a vulture's, directly resonating into Glenn's psyche - a sound that seemingly consumed Glenn's soul. No, it was

not a normal 'sound' transmitted through the air, and brought out the feeling of a worm squirming in the ear.

"...Rather at this time, it should be our first meeting, no?"

The corner of her mouth gently curved up, revealing a red crescent in the darkness. An eerie appearance, on a clearly abnormal existence, brought out almost a primal fear in Glenn.

D-darn... darn... darn it!

Before the girl, Glenn's heart began to beat uncontrollably.

"Tsk!"

Pushing his body into motion, Glenn shot off the platform. At the same time, he drew his pistol with his lightning fast reflexes, and aimed it at the girl...

"?!"

But she was no longer there.

What was there a moment ago was... gone, as if being startled awake from a terrible nightmare.

"Haa... Haa... H-how...?"

For the next few moments, Glenn heavily panted as he stood dumbfounded in place.

"Hey! Glenn, you there? Did something happen?"

Soon, Celica followed in with a laid back expression.

"C-Celica..."

"Hmm? What is wrong? You look a little pale there~"

"N-no, it's..."

To avoid worrying the students, Glenn quietly whispered the details to Celica.

"A mysterious girl?" With furrowed eyebrows, Celica stared at Glenn as if looking at a fool, "Are you sure you aren't just too tired?"

Or maybe *frustrated*? With how heavy you are panting, you couldn't mean *that* right?"

"Idio-! Of course not!"

"Haa... It would be bad if you suddenly turn into a deviant and start attacking the female students. I guess it can't be helped, want me to *satisfy* you tonight then?"

"Even as a joke that's going a bit too far!!"

Celica seductively beat her eyelids, to which Glenn angrily retorted. She always teased Glenn like this, but now was not the time.

"Seriously! I am totally not frustra-... I definitely saw a girl!"

"You know, although I never mentioned this, but I had always kept a search field up, to prevent anything from sneaking up and harming your precious students. Even now, the field is still up."

"Huh? Really? Then that would mean..."

"Yes, this room really was empty. It had neither malevolent nor passive spirits... not even a mouse or a bug could escape my field. Therefore, there was no way for any human to be in here."

Celica said as she puffed her chest in pride, clearly without an ounce of dishonesty. That and, Glenn knew perfectly well how omnipotent her magic was, so what he saw was possibly...

A hallucination? I merely imagined the sensation... the sound? But that...

As Glenn thought back to his encounter, he felt that the sight was quite comparable to a waking dream. His memories and feelings of the earlier events became murkier the more he tried to remember.

"Teacher! What happened?!"

"Enemy?!"

In the usual formation, Sistine, Lumia, and Riel rushed to Glenn's side.

"Teacher, what is wrong? Is there something on my face?"

Being stared by Glenn, Lumia inquisitively tilted her head to the side.

"N-no, it's nothing. Please do not mind it."

Certainly that was a hallucination... Glenn muttered to himself after looking at Lumia's face, *After all...*

"Then, everyone!" Glenn pulled himself back together, clapped his hands a few times, and called for the students still waiting by the door, "Let us begin our investigation of this chamber! Riel, you keep watch by the entrance, Lumia and Sistine will record the etchings on the ground, and Wendy will assist with the interpretation of the tablets, good luck. The remainder of you guys will check for any trap doors or unnatural magic responses. This process will be quite time consuming, so please work diligently."

If even Celica's search field did not pick anything up, it was almost certainly a hallucination or a dream.

Perhaps I really am just exhausted...

Considering how much has happened on the very first day of their investigation, Glenn could not help but get worried about the prospect.

"Haa..." Glenn quietly let out a deep sigh.



Under the crumbling starry night.

I reminisced as I sprinted down the endless 'Corridor of Stars' alone, of the long and solitary days I have spent indifferent to the world...

I do not need anyone, I am perfectly fine alone.

Because, I am stronger than anyone else.

To be seen as a monster, to be rejected by others, and now, even those few who understood me has departed this world. Ultimately, I was shackled by my thoughts.

After that, I threw myself into the world of war, sinking deeper and deeper into the path of destruction. I lack the courage to end my own suffering, but at the same time, I could not bear the loneliness of living for all eternity. Despite the perpetual solitude, I continued to fool myself. I feigned my fortitude, and I feigned my desire for solitude. I kept fighting, and I kept winning, without even much of a thought... In my countless fights, I sought for a conclusion, for some sort of an end.

The me at that time stood at the edge of insanity.

Immortality. To never be able to age, to never see the end of my journey. Then there was the constant nagging of the 'voice' in my heart, and the mysterious sense of mission that I felt. All coupled with the emptiness of my soul and the unbearable loneliness. At that time, I sought out battle after battle. Because only in the field of war, could I temporarily forget it all.

But, thinking back to those times - that long and hellish years, there were still people who approached and reached their hands out to me. For one, the swordswoman known as the strongest of the empire... Yet, I pushed them all away, and continued to run alone, taking on the role of a victim in a tragic drama.

The one who truly sought solitude was none other than myself. I had never realized this simple fact, nor have I tried to realize it. I just kept on fighting and fighting. Even my research into magic was for the simple purpose of acquiring a greater power, and with that power, I went on fighting.

Until, the day...

I... met Glenn.



Third day of the expedition.

The investigation was proceeding smoothly.

At dawn, the group would enter the site to begin investigation, and wipe out any malevolent spirits that coincidentally crossed their path. Once a certain chamber has been fully investigated, the group then proceeded deeper into the structure for the next chamber.

At dusk, the group would return to the campsite.

"So to say, everything was done by alien invaders!"

"W-what are you talking about?!"

"Kash, what is that all about?"

"I came to this conclusion as we were investigating the seventh sanctuary's etchings! Considering those odd drawings on the wall, the ancients must have been ruled over by aliens! This would also explain why the ancients had such advanced understanding of magic."

Under the twinkling night sky, only a single red campfire flickered in the surrounding darkness. There, everyone sat in a tight circle. In the frigid night, as the heat of the crackling fire warmed their bodies and casted long shadows into the distance while the students chatted and laughed away.

Perhaps due to the enthusiasm Sistine showed in ancient civilizations, every night around the fire place, the students would eagerly express their own thoughts on the ancients, somewhat giving the air of a professional group of archaeothaumatology scholars.

"Hey, everyone, dinner is ready!"

"Oh! Lynn, we were all waiting for you! I am starving!"

Lynn, who was the best cook of the expedition, began to serve

everyone their meals. Around the fire, the students could barely contain their anticipation. At the same time, while the students were clamoring at the arrival of their meal, Glenn and Lumia were going over their findings under the light of the fireplace.

"Teacher, after having Wendy goes over the translations of the drawings and etchings in the observatory, were there any leads on spatial-temporal magic?"

"Sadly, none so far..." Glenn paused the work he has on hand to answer Lumia's question, and let out a disappointed sigh.

"Either way, if this observatory really is the ritual site for some sort of magic, then there will definitely be a control room somewhere - an undiscovered 'hidden chamber' in some corners of the ruins. Such was the belief of the previous investigator." As he said that, Glenn revealed a self-deprecating smile, "Honestly, I do not believe we will find anything on this trip. Something as absurd as spatial-temporal magic has no place in reality, I think..."

"Hey! Why are you being so pessimistic over there?" At that time, Sistine came over to where Glenn and Lumia sat.

It seemed she came over to bring the two dinner. She was carrying a tray with four bowls of stew atop. In the cold, the bowls emitted clouds of white steam. Sistine seemed to be angry as she handed Lumia and Riel each a bowl of soup.

"Oh! Stew!"

The stew was made by carefully boiling dried vegetables and meat, with herbs and mushrooms collected from the vicinity. At a glance, the stew was well flavored, and very delicious.

"Thank you! The nights are quite chilly, so I won't hold back!"

But, as Glenn extended his hand to receive his bowl, Sistine purposely pulled away.

"You should not give up! Not give up, you hear?! If you don't work seriously, you may end up glossing over what you could have

discovered!"

"I-I got it! I got it already, just please give me my dinner!"

"Also, even if there weren't any discoveries in the end, you still need to carefully report how you conducted the investigation in your reports. You must not cut any corners and report everything! That and, even in your everyday life, you are always so sloppy and lack any passion..."

"Uwaaa!! More than your lecture, I want my meal!!"

The two began to bicker as usual.

Gulp. Gulp. "Mm. It is delicious."

"Ah? R-Riel?! Those are Sistine's and Teacher's! You mustn't... Ah, it's empty already."

Perhaps Riel was very hungry. Before anyone had noticed, Riel had already finished off the two's share of stew.



"Heh..."

Celica gracefully sat on a boulder a short distance away and watched the exchanges with a smile. In her hands, she held the 'Sorcerer of Melgalius'. Her eyes were full of kindness, as if looking at a precious treasure, as if a mother looking upon her beloved child.

And then, a wave of shouts came from around the campfire.

"Hey, Professor! Please come and listen to what Gibul and I were talking about and tell us what you think. I believe my hypothesis was more reasonable!"

"What are you talking about? No matter how you look at it, my hypothesis should be the better one!"

"Uwaaa!! My dinner?!"

"No way! E-even my dinner... Ahhh!!"

"Hehehe~ Professor Arfonia, please come join us."

"Mm. I still have many questions that I was hoping you can answer!"

Looking at this boisterous group.

"Really, you guys are very loud. But... I guess I should..." Celica revealed a wry smile as she closed the book, and joined the group by the campfire.

Her footstep was surprisingly lithe.

This kind of peaceful and mundane expedition continued as usual...



On the fifth night.

As the cold night chilled the bones, Glenn came to the location that Celica told everyone about. On the far side of a small mountain to the north of the campsite.

"Oh? It looks quite nice here..."

Before Glenn was a natural hot spring lined by small boulders. The scent of sulfur tingled the nose, while the water was murky from the minerals mixed within. The steam floated up from the surface, enveloping the surrounding in white. Even from where Glenn stood, he could feel the warmth from the spring, pushing away the cold evening air.

This natural hot spring was discovered by Celica a few days ago. Celica posited that from what she sensed through the spirit veins, the surrounding area was thermally active. Therefore, as long as they searched around, they would definitely find one.

Although the temperature of the spring is a bit high for bathing, Celica was fully prepared, and set down ice rune on the surrounding boulders, chilling the water to the perfect temperature.

Because of Celica's achievements, the female students, who were originally stuck with using wet towels to wipe down their bodies, came to worship Celica as a god.

"Seriously, that woman sure knows how to enjoy herself... I bet she wanted to soak in the spring as much as the next person..."

Even the relatively dense Glenn came to felt sorry for neglecting the girls by camping out for days on end, so Celica's help was very timely for Glenn.

However, Glenn had been busy every night organizing the results, and wasn't able to use the hot spring. But now that the work on hand had been sorted, Glenn noticed he was completely putrid, so he took the time to come out to the spring for a soak.

"But still, despite being surrounded by beauties, I had to come bath alone. If only there was a companion for the occasion, hehehe~" As Glenn let out his perverted thoughts, he took off his clothes.

...Just to mention, not so long ago.

"I want to go peeping! I want to gaze upon paradise! Even if it will cost me this life of mine!"

At the hot spring, the brave Kash fought a difficult battle against the girls for his hopes and aspirations. But despite his best efforts, he was defeated. But that is a story for another time.

"Now..." After Glenn hid his clothes behind the boulder, he entered the hot spring, "Uwaaa... So good...!"

The pleasure and warmth enveloped him. The finger tips numbed by the cold nights were revived with jolts of pain. The stiff shoulders and waist relaxed as the blood recovered its circulation. Even the fatigue accumulated through days of investigation was slowly being lifted away.

"Haa... So comfortable...♪"

Above him was the snow capped tips of the nearby mountains, glistening under a sky adorned by stars. The moon shyly hid behind the slowly drifting clouds. The tranquil view soothed the soul, which would be made more complete for Glenn if he could have a cup of brandy at hand.

"~♪"

For the next few moments, Glenn soaked in the hot spring, while he gazed at the night sky and hummed a lighthearted tune.

And then.

"But still, how to say this, those guys are really giving it their all..." Glenn muttered to himself as he appreciated the stars above.

Only at this moment did Glenn felt the sting of regret for involving the students in his own personal matter and bringing them out to the middle of nowhere. Despite it being a mere F-ranked ruins, the investigation was more complicated than Glenn had initially imagined, and he was somewhat remorseful for not adequately

thinking it through before asking the students.

Yet despite all his concerns, the students were working very hard, and not one has voiced any displeasure. To have everything proceeding so smoothly, it would undoubtedly be thanks to the students' passion if they were able to wrap the expedition up early.

I should also think about it carefully... really...

As Glenn's senses became muddled from the relaxing atmosphere, he just remained stationary and let his mind wander.

"Hmm?"

Beyond the stones that line the spring, there appeared a presence.

"W-who goes there?" Glenn tensed up and declared.

"Oh? This voice is..."

And then, the shadow unhesitantly approached Glenn and the hot spring. As the steam dissipated, the person revealed before Glenn was...

"Oh Sh-...!"

"Ah? It's Glenn. So you've come."

It was Celica.

She stood at the edge of the hot spring completely nude. The only thing that covered her porcelain white skin was a single towel held at her breast and the large amount of steam. Yet, even they could not completely hide her beautiful figure, with curves that resembled of the beautiful ancient sculptures.

The sudden appearance of the otherworldly beauty made Glenn gulp. His heart beating ever faster.

"How is the water, Glenn? I bet it is quite nice, right?"

"Y-you bastard! At least confirm that there was no one here before taking off your clothe!"

As if trying to get away from Celica, Glenn quickly shuffled to the center of the hot spring, with his back turned to her.

"Y-you go over there! O-otherwise, I'll just leave! Ah, this is not my fault to peep, so you must not blast me with y-your magic." The sudden development made Glenn abnormally nervous.

"Hmm? Why are you acting all nervous? I don't mind at all."

Not sure what went on in her mind, Celica giggled as she bent down and let her long smooth thighs slip into the water, followed by the rest of her body.

"W-wh-...?" Sensing her entering the hot spring, Glenn's whole body grew stiff.

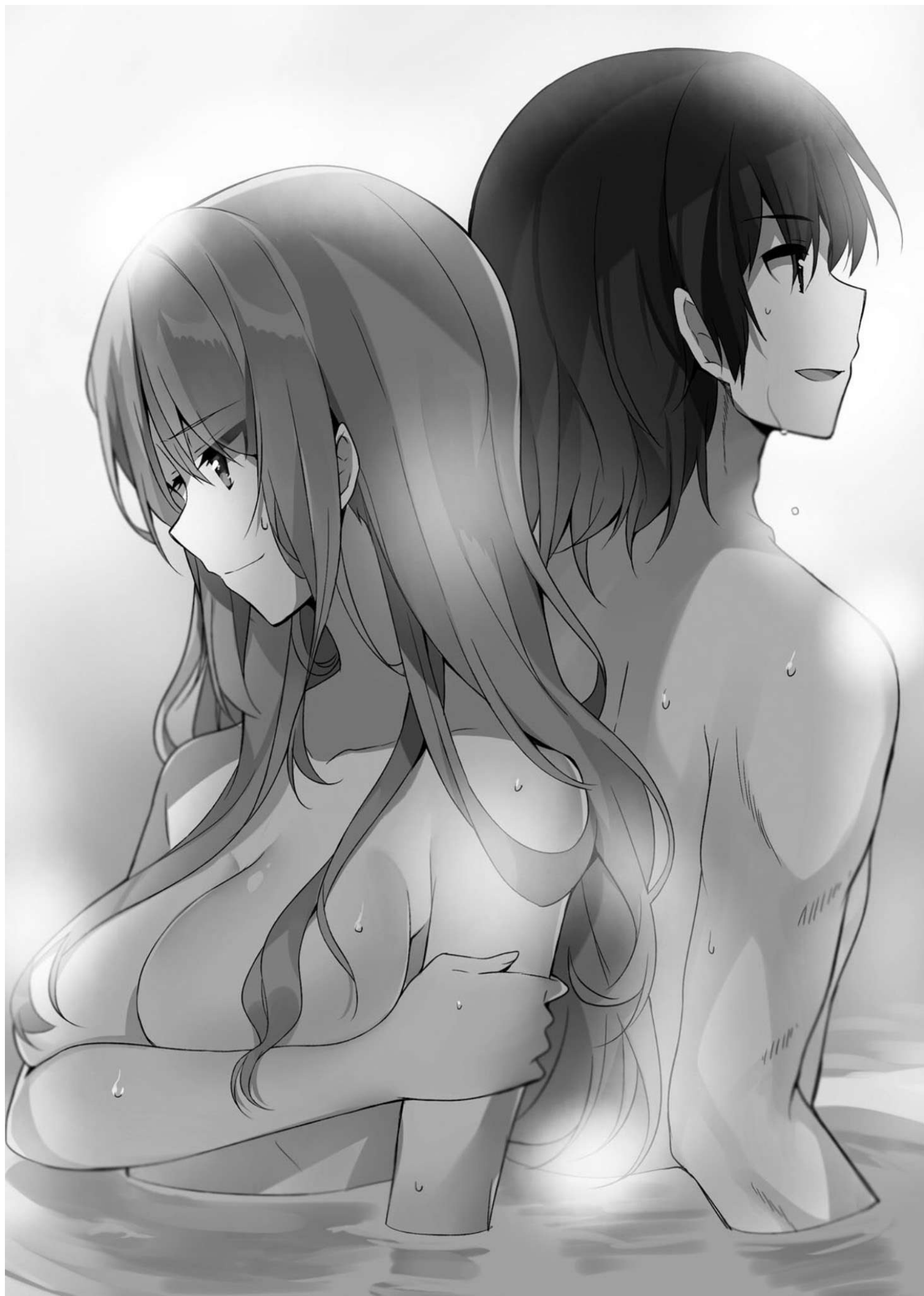
And then...

"Hehehe~" Celica let out a mischievous chuckle as she approached Glenn.

"Here we go~"

"Y-you...!"

She let her back lean on Glenn's. With their skins touching, Glenn felt the sensation of coming in contact with a sheet of high grade silk.



"Ahh, it's nice here." Celica let her weight collapse on Glenn, and relaxed.

On the other hand, Glenn is already reaching his limit.

"W-w-what are you up to!!"

"It shouldn't matter, right? After all, we are family~"

Glenn has grown incredibly nervous, yet on the contrary, Celica remained the same calm self.

"That and, didn't we bathe together frequently when you were young? Shouldn't we have already gotten used to seeing each other nude?"

"T-that was a long time ago! At that time I was still just a brat!"

"Don't worry about the details. Bathing together once in a while isn't bad..."

"...?"

Glenn had noticed that this was not the usual impish Celica, and decided to not push the topic.

"Like that time, soaking together in the bath... is not bad."

Celica's soothing voice repeated the statement once more, and made Glenn felt warm and fuzzy inside.

"..."

Certainly, as long as Celica did not mind, why should I mind?

Glenn slowly regained his original calm. Inside, Glenn thought that occasionally revitalizing their relationship was not a bad idea.

"Haa... Seriously..."

"Hehehe~"

Glenn lost all will to retort, and Celica just gently laughed in response.

With that final exchange, the two just silently enjoyed the hot

spring back-to-back. The warmth transmitted through their backs, the slow breathing, and the sound of the beating heart added to the temperature of the water. Without a single word, the time gently flowed...

A long while passed since they started soaking in the bath before the silence was broken.

"Speaking of which, you really have grown... Glenn." Celica calmly exclaimed.

"Huh?"

"Your back feels so broad now, and to think it was so small back then."

"How long did you think has passed since you picked me up from the streets?"

Glenn's face seemed to have been dyed with a tinge of red, but that may have been caused by the heat from the water.

"Hasn't it been over ten years? It would be weird if I didn't change."

"Is that so... It has already been that long. Time sure flies..."

Glenn felt a bit awkward by the conversation.

Haa... If I think about our relation, it was really somewhat of a curiosity.

About ten years ago, after a certain event had turned Glenn to an orphan, Celica decided to adopt Glenn on a whim. That was when the two of them first met.

To Glenn, Celica was like a mother, a sister, and a friend. Even to this day, Glenn has yet to find the perfect word to describe their complicated relationship. If one had to definitely describe their relationship, it would certainly be...

"S-speaking of which, how are your injuries?" Because the conversation has become more and more awkward, Glenn

forcibly changed the topic.

"Hmm?"

"Umm... Before joining the expedition, didn't you venture deep into the Underground Labyrinth? I had seen it when you first entered the hot spring. There are still many unhealed injuries on your hand and feet."

"Uuu..."

"Huh?"

While his original intention was simply to change the topic, Glenn had unwittingly stepped on a landmine.

"Uwaaa... I can't believe you were able to ogle my entire body in that short amount of time. Ahh~ Is it really safe for us to stay under the same roof? What if you give into your desires and force yourself upon me? You need to take responsibility if that happens, alright?"

"W-what are you talking about?!"

Celica stifled laughter could be heard.

"...Mm. It should be fine. The healing limit has long passed. As long as I regularly use healing magic on the injuries, even the scars should be gone in time. Don't worry."

"I-I am totally not worried about you! Haa... But seriously, it is all because of how obstinate you are with exploring those dangerous ruins. If not for that, such problematic matters would not have happened." Glenn let out a long sigh.

"Speaking of which, you should have been interested in that Underground Labyrinth from a very long time ago, right?"

The Underground Labyrinth. A mysterious large scale ruins located right under the Alzano Imperial Magic Academy. The difficulty was rated as S++, ranked as the most difficult of all the ruins in the empire.

To be honest, the first nine levels of the Labyrinth were completely

safe, so much so that the school turned it into the site for the archaeology practicum.

But beyond the first nine floors, the danger was on a completely different scale. To put it into perspective, the only person who was able to obtain permission for expeditions past the tenth floor in all of the empire was Celica alone.

"Why can't you pick an easier hobby? Given your skill and capability, won't it be easier to just start a magic research laboratory, hire some students, and invent some useful magic tools?"

"Yes, can't argue with that."

"And yet, you stubbornly keep on challenging that lousy Labyrinth. Each time you return littered with injuries, and this most recent time, you almost lost your life!"

"..."

Glenn's serious voice made Celica unable to open her mouth.

"Celica... I think it is better to just give up on that Labyrinth." Glenn sternly told Celica, "I am not saying you lack the ability, but rather, that place is not meant for humans to set their foot in... For a place like that, it is better..."

Given how twisted was Celica's personality, it was rare for Glenn to have the opportunity to talk to her seriously. Glenn believed this might have been the best chance to breach the topic.

"So, please don't go there anymore? Give up on that Underground Labyrinth." As of such, Glenn said what he always wanted and needed to tell Celica.

"..."

"O-of course there is the pride as a seventh-ranked magician, and things like there is no longer any other option... but still, your life should be the top priority."

"..."

"If... you end up meeting misfortune... I..."

"..."

Celica remained silent.

I could not give it up. Her silence permeated such feelings.

"...Hey. Can you at least... tell me your reasons?" The disappointed Glenn tried to change the topic, but even this was met with...

"..."

"...You can't say?"

"...Sorry." Celica lightly uttered words that were filled with sorrow.

Before anyone noticed, the once proud woman was nowhere to be found.

"I am... really sorry... Glenn..."

In her place, was a delicate girl filled with remorse.

"Hey, Glenn, you know... before I had met you, I was a deplorable existence."

"...Celica?"

"I'm sure you have heard that I lost all memories of my life from before four hundred years ago."

"Yes, I also heard you became an immortal..."

"Before I had met with you. With a life that had no end in sight, with the unease from losing my memories, with my unbearable loneliness, I was always irritable, claiming a slight respite of calm through destruction. While there were still people who approached and reached their hands out to me, I pushed them all away, and continued to paint myself with the colors of misfortune... I completely was a deplorable existence."

"..."

"But, I came to find redemption after adopting you. I'm sure you are feeling gratitude towards me for taking you in, but it was rather I who should feel gratitude towards you."

Why did she bring all this up?

Although Glenn was unsure, he just quietly listened.

"But... After I had gained so much from you... After I had already been blessed by our relationship..."

Glenn felt the increasing tremble from Celica's back as she talked.

"Because of my selfish wish to push you to greatness, I didn't think twice before recommending you to become a Court Mage. When I irresponsibly forced you to endure those hellish days, when you should have every right to hate me for it... despite all that had happened, you still... to me..." Celica abruptly stopped.

With both her hands tightly squeezing her trembling shoulders, Celica did not utter a single word more.

As silence descended, a heavy atmosphere enveloped both of them, until...

"Although I could not understand the nature of your troubles... nor understand what you seek..." Glenn carefully picked his words, and spoke in a cheerful tone, "Hahaha~ you should not be so critical of yourself! Surely I had met with some misfortunes, but you shouldn't mind it so much! After all, given our relationship..."

After a moment's pause, Glenn asked in the most heartfelt manner.

"Aren't we... family?"

Yes. To Glenn, Celica was like a mother, a sister, and a friend. Even to this day, Glenn has yet to find the perfect word to describe their complicated relationship. If one had to definitively describe

their relationship, it would certainly be...

"Family... is it?"

Celica emotionlessly replied.

"Glenn, do you really see me as... family?"

"...Ah?" After being blindsided by the unexpected question, Glenn momentarily frozen and missed his opportunity to reply.

The heavy atmosphere once again returned to the pair. Soon enough, Celica broke the stifling silence...

"...Sorry. It seemed that the heat from the hot spring is getting to me, just forget what I said." Celica lifted herself off Glenn's back and stood up.

"Celica?"

"Tomorrow will be the last stop of this expedition, at the deepest recess of the observatory, the planetarium chamber. Is that correct?"

Celica has returned to her usual self.

"I'm sure you will be able to wrap up this expedition splendidly by tomorrow, so give it your all."

"Ah... Mm."

With that said, Celica left the hot spring and departed. Glenn, who alone remained in the hot spring, was confounded by the meaning of Celica's earlier words. In the end, Glenn couldn't figure out her thoughts.

"What was exactly going on with her? The academy and the Underground Labyrinth, the expedition this time, and even myself. To that person, what does it all mean?"

Glenn's mind was a complete blank. No matter how much Glenn tried to think, he could not understand.

Was there really something that linked the three together? Glenn

simply could not draw up any reasonable conclusion.

"Ahh! Really! What is she up to-...!"

At the time Glenn frustratingly rubbed his head, from behind the rocks came the presence of several people.

"...Ah?"

Glenn was completely frozen.

"Sisti! Hurry up!"

"Seriously, stop rushing me."

Glenn could see from between the cracks of the rocks that it was Lumia. Although she had most of her body wrapped in towel, but she was definitely... nude.

"Tomorrow will be the last day of the expedition, so this is the last opportunity for us to soak in the hot springs! We can't miss this opportunity!"

It wasn't just Lumia and Sistine.

"The hot spring's temperature is perfect, and I have heard that soaking in hot spring is good for one's complexion. I really wish we could keep on coming here."

"Mm. We really need to thank the Professor for finding the hot spring for us."

There were also the voices of Wendy and Teresa from beyond the rocks, and if one simply extrapolated slightly, Riel and Lynn should also be among them.

The girls who came to bathe in the depth of night slowly approached.

Ahhh! Didn't they already soak in the hot spring before and had already went to their tents to sleep? Are they seriously coming for a second time? Is that even possible?!

Glenn impulsively dived into the water.

"Mm. Open air hot spring is definitely the best!"

Almost immediately, the naked girls came out from behind the rocks and arrived at the edge of the hot spring.

D-darn it! Why did I reflexively hide?!

Glenn regretted his thoughtless mistake that led to this dilemma.

Why did I do something so stupid? Why didn't I just loudly announce my presence to them earlier? Won't they now take me for a suspicious peeper who purposely hid away?

At that moment, as if flaunting their youth with their watery skin, the girls entered the hot spring one after another.

"Uwaaa... As I expected, this hot spring is too good..."

"Mm... Very warm."

"Feels great."

Sistine stretched her tired limbs, Lumia comfortably immersed herself in the water, and Riel sat with sleepy eyes while she splashed around. Each of them enjoyed the hot spring in their own unique way.

"Lynn, without your glasses, you look surprisingly beautiful!"

"Hmm? Ah... I-is that so? I-..."

"Hehehe~ Lynn, you should be more confident about yourself!"

Wendy, Lynn, and Teresa also soaked in the hot springs.

Glenn was now fully surrounded by six beauties. To any outsiders, the scene looked like a paradise worthy of envy, but Glenn himself was completely preoccupied with his own worries to care.

Uwaaa?! These guys, how long do they plan on staying here! Could I really hold my breath until they all leave?! Impossible. I will definitely die.

Darn it! Maybe I should just chant [Water•Breathing]... No, that would give me away with all the bubbles!

The girls didn't notice the troubled Glenn, and just lightheartedly chatted away.

"Speaking of which, are we really fine like this? Won't Kash-san come again...?"

"Ah, no need to worry, Wendy. I have already strung Kash up and hung him by the feet."

"So be at ease. Although it would be fun if we could roast him a little."

"Ahaha~"

H-how scary! Are they demons?!

"Ugh... Lumia, yours is still as magnificent as always."

"R-really? In terms of bust size, aren't Professor Arfonia's and Teresa's larger...?"

"C-certainly, Professor Arfonia's figure is perfect... Everything about her is like a beautiful sculpture from a bygone era. I am so jealous!"

"Teresa, you really don't appreciate your own blessings enough! To us, you are no different from Professor Arfonia!"

"Hahaha! Speaking of which, yours still look so small, Sistine! On this point alone I am superior to you!" (Wendy)

"Ugh..."

"Ah? Lynn, you... Despite how short you are, could you r-really be larger than-...? Are you the type who appears thin when wearing clothes?"

"Hmph! Lynn is about the same size as Lumia, right?"

"Luumia! Why is everyone's bust round, while mine is flat?"

"Uhh... T-that..."

"Sistine is also quite flat."

"Uwaaa!!"

Blurb blurb...

Hmm... So I see...

The submerged Glenn just obtained some seriously good Intel, and quickly began to sort out the details in his head.

In short, as far as the combat potential of the female members on this expedition, it goes...

Celica >= Teresa > Lumia = Lynn > Wendy > Sistine > Riel

Hmm, this is definitely gold-... Heck no! This isn't time to escape from reality! I am really running out of air!! The water is also getting a bit hot and my head is getting dizzy! I am about to die here!!

Surrounded on all sides by naked beauties laughing away in the night, Glenn continued to resist, and suppressed his pain and desire to breath. Until, the need to breath finally overwhelmed him...

"Haaaa!!"

Splash!!

A huge burst of water appeared in the middle of the girls.



"Haa! Haa! Air... is really a wonderful thing!"

With the sudden development, all the girls were dumbfounded, and stood there completely naked.

Glenn glanced at the girls, and after comparing with what he remembered when he saw Celica earlier...

"...Correct." Glenn revealed the face of having a great discovery, looking incredibly refreshed.

"W H A T... I S... C O R R E C T?!" The reanimated Sistine grumbled with veins visible on her forehead.

She raised her left hand toward Glenn while gathering magic power in her palm...

That night, deep within a certain mountain, the scream of a lone man echoed.



Chapter 4: Her Tenacity and Change

Under the crumbling starry night.

I reminisced as I sprinted down the endless 'Corridor of Stars' alone, of the days after I had adopted Glenn on a whim.

...

...After I had endured the endless fighting and had reached complete exhaustion, I whimsically decided to adopt the homeless and young Glenn. There wasn't any specific reason, just purely a whim.

After the event that brought Glenn and me together, I realized my own weakness that was hidden under the false veneer of strength, and no longer pretended to be strong.

Right now, I decided to treasure my present, and decided to live with another.

What I received was the warm, calm, and gentle days - days that can make me forget the pain and loneliness that accompanied me.

"Hey, Celica! What experiment will we be doing today?"

"Let me think... I know, how about alchemy? Want to make a red crystal together?"

"Uwaaa! That sounds fun!!"

The time spent with Glenn has quickly thawed my already frozen heart.

This was the greatest joy I had felt since I first awoke in this foreign world. People could not live alone, such a simple logic known to

everyone took me close to four hundred years to realize.

But, it was at this time, I was afflicted by a certain 'ailment'...



"Tsk...? So this normal looking room is the famed centerpiece of the 'Taum Observatory'?"

On the sixth and likely final day of the expedition, the group arrived at the deepest recess of the site, the planetarium chamber.

At the center of the beautifully polished hemispheric room laid a large and mysterious magic device, with a massive black tablet nearby.

The magic device took on the same shape of a large balance scale. At its center, one could see the numerous complicated gears and mechanisms all coming together in a thick columnar core. Two objects lie on the end of the 'arms', each being a shaped piece of crystal in the form of an icosahedron with its twelve corners filed away - a type of tricontadihedron.

This magic apparatus was actually the functional part of the gigantic planetarium, a relic built using ancient magic from time long ago. Previous researched postulated that it utilized light magic to create a projection of the night sky onto the hemispheric room.

Beyond the hypothesis gleaned from the tablets, nothing more was known about the object. Further analysis was prevented with the presence of Etherio Coating, which made dismantling or even removing portions of the device impossible.

What was the meaning of this device? For what reason was the device built? Because of all these unanswered questions, the device was known to be a mystery.

"I have never seen it in person before. But from what I heard, this planetarium is quite impressive! Glenn, you paying attention?"

"Ah... Right. Is that so...?"

Celica was her usual self. The sight of her frail self yesterday at the hot spring felt more and more like a dream. Glenn definitely did not want to bring the matter up with Celica, and tried his best to suppress his memory of her. (Or rather, really wanted to forget about all that transpired yesterday.)

"Umm, Teacher? Since we took the effort to come out all the way to 'Taum Observatory', we should use this planetarium to take a gander at the stars, don't you agree?" Sistine has been nudging Glenn ever since they set foot in the planetarium.

"Huh? The stars? Are you serious...?"

Suddenly remember what transpired last night, Glenn impulsively shrunk back a step. But Sistine did not seem to mind, and once again pleaded for the opportunity.

"I beg of you, teacher. I want to see the planetarium in action no matter what!"

"Umm... I-I will think about it..."

"Let her take a look. After all, the device is one of the few famous landmarks in this observatory." Celica voiced her support for Sistine.

"But... rather than fiddling with the useless planetarium device, I am more interested in summarizing our findings and thinking of a good thesis to write."

"I'll be sure to help you on that later, so just go ahead and enjoy the planetarium show."

"Haa... If you already promised that much..." Glenn reluctantly followed the previous thesis's procedure in activating the device - first pressing a few locations on the black tablet, and then inputting the commands.

"Hmm, I think this is about right? Ugh, ancient writings, how annoying..."

The magic used by the ancients, also known as ancient magic. Modern people could not understand the theory and the construction of ancient magic. No matter how they investigated, they could not use modern magic as a basis for the understanding of ancient magic. But, even not understanding the theory behind the devices, they at least could use modern magic to operate the already existing devices.

"I think that should be good."

Everyone held their breath as Glenn tapped the various glowing letters on the black display tablet. Suddenly, the room was enveloped by darkness, and followed by a change to their world.

"...?!"

Nebulae, comets, stars all appeared as they immersed themselves in the scene above their heads. Countless twinkling stars greeted them in the dreamlike environment of space, as if a bowl of silver dust was spread upon the darkness, leaving everyone breathless at the magnificent scene. It was hard to believe themselves as still being confined to the chamber. Was it merely a trick of the light that projected the image upon the surface? No... At that moment, everyone felt like they were standing in the middle of the boundless cosmos.

"A-ancients are quite the odd bunch. Despite being such a high level sorcerous civilization, they would waste their resources on something so insignificant... What were they think-...?" As Glenn stood dumbfounded at the sight of the stars, his usual foul mouth could not seem to spew out condescending remarks.

"Who knows? Technological advancement and realization are different. Perhaps this fit the agenda of a certain religious ceremony, or perhaps this is purely for entertainment, we will never know..."

After a while, Celica took over for the mesmerized Glenn and shut down the device.

As the device came to a halt, the room immediately reverted to its original appearance.

"Then, let us begin our investigation. Don't worry, once we are done, you are free to look at the planetarium for as long as you would like." Celica nudged the reluctant students to work.

Then, as with their usual day, they began to record and translate the drawings and etchings on the ground, search for hidden doors and passageways, and scour for evidence of unusual magic. The same mundane action they had been performing for the rest of the expedition.

However, everyone understood that the work will be more or less done by the end of the day, and as of such, despite everyone being spread out across the room, everyone worked diligently in their tasks.

Mm. Either way, I doubt we will find anything peculiar...

Glenn smiled wryly as he traced his hand across the carving on the ground. But then...

"Professor Arfonia!" Sistine rushed over to Celica.

"Hmm? What is wrong, Sistine? Are you looking for me?"

"Umm... I have a favor to ask." Sistine was somewhat nervous as she asked, "Please, professor. Could you analyze the planetarium device?"



Sistine reminisced about the time when his grandfather, Redolf Fibel, was still alive.

"My beloved Celica. Listen carefully... Within the planetarium device located in 'Taum Observatory'... there is something... that somehow connects it to the Sky Castle..."

"W-what are you saying? Are there any evidence? Dear grandfather?"

"N-not at the current moment..." The bedridden grandfather meekly shook his head, "But, the intuition built up through years of delving into archaeothaumatology and chasing after the Melgalius Sky Castle... that intuition tells me it is correct."

Reflecting his heart, his eyes shone with absolute conviction.

"But... Regrettably, if it weren't for these old bones of mine, I would definitely go to the 'Taum Observatory' and reveal the truth behind the planetarium device."

"G-grandfather..."

Sistine then recalled the thesis 'Investigation: Regarding Taum Observatory and Spatial-Temporal Magic'.

It was the last thesis written by her grandfather, his opus ultimum.

The thesis was lauded by all as an exemplary work of deductive reasoning... but in the end, it fell just a step short. Such was the thought of not only Sistine and her grandfather, but all who came in contact with the thesis. Despite its wonderful reasoning, in the end, it lacked the evidence to tie everything together.

As of such...

"I beg of you, Professor Arfonia! Please..." Sistine was filled with passion, and lowered her head to Celica.

"H-hey, White Cat... I'm sure this is just a simple planetarium device." Faced with the aggressive Sistine, Glenn fell into distress, "It is not just us. Some very powerful magicians have already investigated the device, with all the tools available to man, and even their conclusion was that the device is noth-..."

"Wait. I understand, let me give it a try."

Although unsure why, Celica agreed to Sistine's favor and silenced the annoyed Glenn.

She then stood in front of the planetarium device.

"Oh? Are you really going to do it? If you already agreed, then I

will leave it in your able hands. After all, there is certainly the chance that you may discover something new."

After hearing Glenn's somewhat expectant words, Celica gave a nod, and chanted the analytical Black Magic [Function•Analyze].

Sistine took a deep gulp, eagerly looking over Celica's magic analysis.

I-if we can just find the evidence, then grandfather's innovative research could finally be properly reevaluated, and grandfather will be able to gain the recognition he deserves...!

Sistine's grandfather, Redolf Fibel was indeed a genius magician, so much so that even if Sistine worked all her life, she may not reach even an ounce of her grandfather brilliance.

But, contrary to his incredible abilities, Redolf's later works were evaluated quite poorly, because until his final moments, he had never made any groundbreaking discovery. Because of her respect for her grandfather, Sistine could not bear her late grandfather being treated like this, to see her late grandfather's work ridiculed.

If it is Professor Arfonia... if it is the continents greatest seventh-ranked mage... then perhaps...

She will find some other mechanism within the planetarium device? Maybe, as her late grandfather has postulated, residual magic would show that the device was related to spatial-temporal magic. Or maybe, as her grandfather believed till his dying breath, the device held a connection to the Sky Castle. Sistine looked upon Celica with hopeful eyes as she silently waited in anticipation.

After about an hour had passed since the start of the analysis, as Glenn started to doze off...

"...N-nothing." Celica let out a deep breath as she dispelled the magic, and then turned to Sistine with a sorrowful gaze, "I have

carefully searched every nook and cranny of the device, and other than the function as a planetarium, there is nothing else to it."

"I-is that so..."

Sistine drooped her shoulders. While Sistine's response was understandable, Glenn could not fathom why Celica appeared disappointed as well, and let out a deep sigh.

"So, even you could not find anything. And here I thought, 'If it were you~'. Ah, either way, could I get a copy of your analysis?"

"Mm. I have it recorded in the crystal, feel free to take a look at it later."

"Thank you, that will be a big help."

Glenn caught the crystal Celica tossed over. On the other side of the device, Sistine began to sink deeper and deeper into depression.

H-how... Even Professor Arfonia couldn't find anything. That is to say...

No one alive on this earth could find the secret to the planetarium device. Rather, there likely was nothing to be found from the very beginning. Which means, Sistine's grandfather was wrong.

No, there must be something, grandfather has never been wrong. And when I grow up, I will definitely unveil the mystery.

Sistine wanted to confidently make such a declaration. But even the seventh-ranked Celica Arfonia couldn't find anything. Face with this reality, Sistine could not help but fall into depression.

"That and..."

At this moment, Sistine was also disappointed with herself, unwilling to accept that she lost to Celica in everything. Even for the sake of proving her grandfather's hypothesis, she had to borrow Celica's power. But more importantly, when recalling

Glenn's actions earlier...

Glenn obediently listened to Celica's decisions, and activated the planetarium device. Then, when Celica wanted to analyze the planetarium device, Glenn had a face full of anticipation, and agreed with all of Celica's conclusions. In short, from the very beginning, the one Glenn trusted the most on this expedition was Celica, and not Sistine - and it was confirmed time and time again during this expedition.

"Hmm? Wait, Celica, look at the etchings on this panel, what is your assessment?"

"Oh? This is quite similar to what I saw during the expedition to Cantare's Nougat ruins. If memory serves, I believe the best interpretation of this design would be..."

Even after the investigation has recommenced, Glenn remained close to Celica. As far as the investigation was concerned, from the knowledge on ancient civilizations, to questions about on ancient magic technology, and then to the general direction, Glenn has always relied on Celica, to which Celica has always responded accordingly. To this fact, Sistine was feeling extremely dissatisfied.

When I was the one specifically recruited to serve as the archaeothaumatology consultant...

"It can't be helped, Sisti." Lumia tried to placate Sistine after noticing her troubled feelings, "The gap between Sisti and the professor is still quite large. From her explanations, it is not hard to see that she has experience in numerous A and S ranked ruins. Not sure why, but the professor is extremely well informed in the field of archaeothaumatology, no different from any expert."

Lumia was correct. Although Celica never explicitly advertised her experiences, it was clear from her replies. Celica's understanding of ancient civilizations easily overshadowed that of Sistine, despite never having had published a single paper on

archaeothaumatology. Whenever Sistine discussed archaeothaumatology with Celica, she would be awestruck by Celica's breadth of facts and the depth of understanding. Sadly, being beaten in her own field was what brought about the greatest shock to Sistine.

"Not to mention, Professor Arfonia is the mentor of our teacher, as well as a mother-like figure to him. As long as the professor is present, it is no wonder that teacher would naturally come to rely on her..."

"But still... Uuu..."

Sistine looked upon the graceful lady next to the kneeling Glenn as he examined the carvings.

That place should have been rightfully mine...

Although Sistine herself could not identify the reason why she felt this way, she nevertheless watched them with a sense of unease and jealousy.

"Why... does my heart hurt so much?" Sistine muttered under her breath. At that moment...

"...?!"

A flash of inspiration came to Sistine. Sure, Sistine was inferior to Celica on many levels, but if she carry out her plan, then perhaps she could one-up her.

"Sisti?" Lumia tilted her head inquisitively as Sistine surveyed the surroundings.

Once Sistine confirmed that everyone was busy with their work, and would unlikely interfere, she pulled close to Lumia and whispered.

"Hey, Lumia, I have a favor to ask..."

"To think, there really is nothing new to be found here..." Glenn grumbled as he browsed through the compiled notebook of

expedition results.

"Mm. Although nothing new was found, at least there is the closure of having accomplished the investigation." Celica said as her eyes are fixed on the notebook in Glenn's hand, "Given how thorough we were, I'm sure the students will also collaborate on the 'Ruins lack anything of interest' conclusion. Oh and, don't forget to thank all the students once this is done, got it?"

"Yeah, sure." Glenn gave Celica a lukewarm response.

"Mm. Nothing interesting... Of course, I should have expected this..." Celica held a complicated expression as she muttered to herself.

Her face from the side was dyed with melancholy, although no one knew why.

"...Celica? What exactly is wrong... with you?" Glenn, being worried about Celica, pressed her on the matter, but he was soon interrupted.

"Wh-..."

Really, it was a sudden coup.

Whiir.

The surrounding began to reverberate with magic as streaks of blue light raced along the etchings on the ground.

"What...?!"

Glenn hastily turned his head.

The planetarium device was beginning to churn.

I-It's moving, what exact is happening?!

The previous thesis has never described such abnormal function before.

Glenn and the students were bewildered and remained where they stood. At the start, the planetarium device's two arms did as it

had done the previous time, and projected the image of the stars onto the chamber. But then, the two arms began to spin along with the image of the stars. Faster and faster they spun, until the trail of the star's silvery light drew countless concentric circles centered overhead. After a while, the device finally began to slow down, and with it, the starry night disappeared from view.

"Wh-...?!"

At the north end of the chamber, the blue light illuminated a three-dimensional 'doorway'. It was clearly a doorway leading to another space, a form of portal. Inside the floating portal was pitch black, and no one could tell where the portal leads.

"N-no way. Is this for real?!" Sistine and Lumia exclaimed as they stood next to the stone control panel next to the planetarium device.

From the look of things, it was clear that the portal appeared because of some manipulation on their part.

In the moment that followed, Glenn and all the other students simply stood dumbfounded at the mysterious portal that appeared.

"Uwaaa! Too awesome!!" Following Kash's outburst, all the students ran up to Sistine.

"Hey, how did you do that? What did you do to make that appear?!"

"Surely, this must count as an impressive find? It is a function that no one has ever heard about before!"

"Ahhh!! I can't believe Sistine got to make a name for herself before me!!"

"I see... it requires specific activation procedures to reveal the secret function. Then, Sistine, care to explain what exactly you did?"

Kash, Cecil, Wendy, and Gibul all joined in cheering.

T-this can't be possible, right?!

Glenn trembled at the discovery.

The students thought that Sistine used some sort of unorthodox method and chanced upon the secret function while fiddling with the control panel. But that was a misunderstanding, the reality was more severe than they had imagined.

When even the seventh-ranked Celica concluded that 'Other than the function as a planetarium, there is nothing else to it' using analytical magic, a mere second-ranked Sistine had no way of challenging that conclusion. In other words, there was no way for Sistine to have opened the door with the device's in-built mechanism.

Glenn placed Celica's recording crystal to his forehead and uttered the chant. The recorded data and analysis on the planetarium device flowed through his mind, and after a moment...

I knew it! There was no way for any hidden mechanisms to be located within the device, there is simply no room for it to be placed! Even its current mechanism barely fitted inside the structure! For it to be possible...

Glenn removed the crystal and turned to Celica.

"Hey, Celica. What do you think? Could it be that she...?"

Yet, Celica did not pay any attention to Glenn.

"Celica...?"

Celica gripped her own head, gasping heavily with her leg on the ground.

"H-how could it be possible?"

Her face was pale, with cold sweats breaking out all over. Her condition was clearly very terrible, but her bulging eyes remain

fixated on the portal made out of light.

"C-Corridor... of... S-Stars? R-right, this is the 'Corridor of Stars'!!"
Celica was acting in an extremely unusual manner as her mouth muttered odd words.

"Hey! What are you talking about? Corridor... of what?!"

"H-how can something like this... be possible...? B-but, I am... certainly...!" Celica kept muttering in a trance-like state, and then slowly stood up, "R-right... I..."

Celica wobbled as she slowly approached the portal, like an insect flying toward the light. But then, as if someone had pushed her from behind, Celica began to dash toward the mysterious portal with all her speed.

"Professor Arfonia?!"

"Celica?!"

To everyone's surprise, Celica sprinted into the portal and vanished.

"What?! Celica! Why the heck did you do that?!"

No one could believe what had just happened. For the experienced Celica, who had gone on countless expeditions, to make such a rudimentary mistake was unthinkable.

"Hey, Celica! We still have no idea where the portal goes! Aren't you being a bit too rash?! Seriously, come back already!" Glenn hurriedly tried to chase after Celica.

But, perhaps the portal has exceeded its time limit, or perhaps because a mechanism in place for when a person enters, the sound of the magic earlier has once again come.

"Wh-?"

Before Glenn's very eyes, Celica's back disappeared from view as the portal vanished.

"Darn it! Celica! Celicaaa!!" Glenn leapt onto the tile where the portal had been and fervently shouted.

Silence. Everyone who was present at the scene was at a loss for words. Celica had vanished through the mysterious portal.

Because of the emergent situation, Glenn gathered all the students together and returned to the campsite. After restricting the restless students to their own tents, Glenn summoned Sistine and Lumia over to discuss the details. As expected, Riel came tagging along with the two, but since Glenn planned to keep her in the loop anyways, no objections were made.

"Teacher?"

"I believe such precautions may be necessary..."

Glenn placed a magic crystal on each of the tent's four corners, and then activated the soundproofing wards. It was to prevent others from outside to eavesdrop on the conversation.

"Then, let us hear what you two did to the planetarium device."

"Ah, right..."

With that, Sistine and Lumia summed up their activities...

"As I suspected..."

Not willing to accept Celica's results, Sistine secretly borrowed Lumia's special ability, and analyzed the planetarium device with Black Magic [Function•Analyze].

Lumia's unique ability was [Magic Amplification], and could temporarily amplify the magic power of one she comes in contact with, allowing for a significantly stronger magic. Sistine only wanted to see if she could pick up anything Celica may have missed with Lumia's assistance, but it turned out to be an incredible miscalculation.

With Lumia's amplification, Sistine surprisingly found a hidden mechanism within the device, and discovered a function that no

one else had noticed. They had essentially struck gold.

Sistine could not resist testing the mechanism out, and began to operate the control panel as indicated. She ended up activating the unknown function, and what followed was the appearance of the portal. Or so the story goes...

"Teacher, what do you mean by 'as suspected'?"

"Lumia, I had always felt from a long time ago that your [Magic Amplification] is not really as simple as we thought." Because of the sensitivity of the information, Glenn lowered his voice.

During the previous incident with the field trip. Lumia was kidnapped by a certain evil magician and made to participate as part of 'Project:Revive Life' by forcibly activating her ability. As with their previous assessment, [Magic Amplification] was believed to temporarily amplify the magic of those she come in contact, thereby allowing stronger magic to be performed. But, no matter how much amplification Lumia was able to provide, it should still be impossible to complete 'Project:Revive Life'. However, the reality was that 'Project:Revive Life' did succeed.

Glenn believed this incident was not unlike the previous. Likely, the magic mechanism Sistine identified was one of ancient magic, that would have been otherwise unintelligible to their modern understanding. Yet, Lumia's ability made that a reality.

In short, Lumia's ability was a 'certain' power that makes the impossible, possible. And this was likely to be the real reason why Lumia was targeted by the Researchers of Divine Wisdom.

But now was not the time to delve into that matter.

"I'm sorry...! So sorry, teacher! I-if I wasn't so obstinate, this could have all been avoided."

"No, Sisti is not at fault here... If I had given more of a thought before using my ability, then..."

"Silly, neither of you is in the wrong here." Glenn let out a sigh as

he saw their apologetic and teary eyes.

"Certainly, I would have liked if you asked for permission first before going ahead with your power... Despite being in a foreign land, aren't you guys acting a bit too overconfident just because you are surrounded by your classmates?"

"S-sorry, I was... hasty."

"But still, we were originally here to unravel the mystery of the ruins, so what you found can't be really be said as a bad thing. Rather, the real problem is..."

Bam! Glenn angrily pounded the desk in the center of the tent. Lumia and Sistine could not help but shirk back at his rage.

"That crazy old woman! What exactly was she thinking?! Charging in alone like that...!"

"Glenn... what should we do about Celica?" Riel asked with her usual emotionless tone.

"Of course it would be to bring her back!" Glenn immediately replied, "I have a bad feeling about this. That Celica was acting weird lately, although I do not know the reason. Either way, we cannot simply abandon her like this!"

Celica was, in Glenn's eyes, someone who had always been quite reserved and met others with an aloof but confident attitude. Glenn has never seen Celica so panic-stricken before. Not only that, when recalling the conversation with her at the hot spring the previous night, Glenn could constantly envision her unusually depressed face. As of such, Glenn was convinced something was wrong with her ever since.

"White Cat, Lumia, listen well. I need you to open that portal again, and Riel, once I am gone, I leave the rest of the students in your care. Do you all understand?" Glenn said to the three girls as he took out explosives and ammo from his baggage, "I will head to the other side of the portal, and will need you to open the portal -

once tomorrow morning, once at lunch, and once more at night. If I have yet to return with Celica by then, I want you to leave us and return to Fejite."

Glenn could sense the nervous atmosphere from Lumia and Sistine behind him. However, shrugging it off, Glenn went on to complete one final check of his revolver, and holstered it on the back of his belt.

"The good thing is that others will think you only accidentally chanced upon the mechanism for the portal. To avoid Lumia's ability from being revealed, I need you three to get your stories all sorted out."

"Teacher, I want to come along." Lumia requested as Glenn was heading out of the tent, "During class, I have heard you mention it before. Within ancient ruins, there are many portals that allow access to another floor, but the majority of them are not one-way, right? Since the ancients themselves also used the same portals, making the portals one-way will only be problematic for them."

Lumia eyes were bright with conviction.

"In other words, it is highly possible for there to be another control panel to open the portal from the other side. If we instead use that control panel to open the portal, then the chance of teacher's and professor's safe return will be greatly amplified, am I not right?"

"Y-yes, that isn't wrong... but..."

"I know the risk involved! But, I am fully resolved! So, please also let me help with the rescue of Professor Arfonia! I beg of you!"

"But-..." Just as Glenn opened his mouth to reject her.

"T-teacher... I-I also want to go..." Sistine, who has been seemingly hesitant with her head hung low, suddenly declared. Although her shoulders were clearly trembling, she still firmly stated, "Because this was all my fault to start. I know teacher tends to boast, so there needs for someone to cover your back. That and, although I am

not as knowledgeable as my grandfather, I still have spent countless hours studying archaeothaumatology. Once we are on the other side, my knowledge perhaps could be of some use... so...!"

And then,

"I will go as well. I want to rescue Celica." Riel plainly announced.

"Y-you guys..." Glenn looked at Lumia and the others, with his heart in complete turmoil.

Riel aside, the danger was simply too great for Lumia and Sistine to come along. No matter how low the ranking of the ruins was, all of it would be thrown out the window when dealing with uncharted territory. 'It shouldn't be that big a problem'... There were plenty of stories of explorers stepping into a new area with such naïve thoughts, only to never return.

Certainly, there was always the chance that they would be able to immediately locate Celica and return. However, there was also the chance that things won't go smoothly, and what awaited them on the other side was an enchanted cave with no way to return. Despite being a worst case scenario, it nevertheless was very possible. Could Glenn really bring Lumia and the others into such a dangerous place?

"...Darn it."

Glenn was conflicted, and momentarily unsure how to decide. After struggling internally, and taking into account all the risks and rewards, Glenn made his final decision.

"I still cannot take you guys along. You will remain here, and only open the portal according to our previous arrangement." Glenn announced to the girls.

"Teacher?!"

"With me gone, who will lead and protect the rest of the students? I cannot take you along, so..." Glenn turned his back to

them, clearly with no wish to discuss the matter further.

"Wh-...?!"

As Glenn was walking out of the tent for a breath of fresh air, Glenn was greeted by Kash, Wendy, and the rest of the students standing outside his tent, despite his explicit instructions for them to remain in their own respective tents. The students themselves seemed to have something they wished to say.

Did they hear everything earlier?! N-no, that is impossible with the soundproofing wards I had set up...

Glenn tried to hide his surprise at the sudden development.

"Hey, teacher... what is your plan regarding the matter with Professor Arfonia?" Kash asked after a long period of silence.

"C-Celica? Don't worry about it, I am going right now to bring her back. So all of you, rest easy."

"You are going alone?"

"Hmph... Of course. For something as simple as this, I am more than enough."

Sistine rushed out from the tent, "T-teacher?! For you to say something like that!"

"That's right, we...!"

"Enough is enough! You kids just be quiet!" Glenn's loud outburst cut Sistine and the others short.

"Hmm?" Kash looked at Sistine, Lumia, and Riel standing behind Glenn, and after seeing their anxious faces, he then turned to look at Glenn.

"Oh, I get it now... Hey, teacher..." Kash leapt at Glenn after a short dash, "Y-you baaastard!!"

"Uwaaa!!"

Kash's kick flew straight into Glenn, and made Glenn roll all the

way back into the tent behind him.

"Really! Knowing you, I bet you were thinking about Lumia and other's safety when you planned to go alone. But now is not the time for that!" Kash pointed his finger at the fallen Glenn, "Although I may not be qualified to say this. I know you are strong, but you are still just a third-ranked magician! You will definitely need help! Am I right?"

"T-that..."

Kash's words were very reasonable, making it tough for Glenn to refute. Certainly, if it was just Glenn alone, even against a mere malevolent spirit would prove to be very difficult. With that in mind, for Glenn to solo uncharted territory was beyond stupid, and would likely result in Glenn's senseless death.

"While I may just be a burden if I went, Lumia have her unmatched ability in healing magic, Sistine have her combat magic and knowledge, and Riel have her sword... I'm certain they will become your strength!"

"Kash, you..."

"Teacher! If Lumia and the others have already resolved themselves to follow you, you should just let them! This way, the rescue of the professor will be able to proceed more smoothly! Don't worry about us, we will be fine on our own!"

"Don't look at us like this, we are, after all, your proud students, and we have gained plenty of experience in real combat. As long as we remain in the campsite, even if we end up facing dangerous monsters, I'm sure we will get through it just fine."

"The professor is important to teacher, right? Why are you still putting up a strong front at a moment like this?"

Kash, Gibul, and Wendy all chipped in one after another.

"Teacher, please don't be rash and try to do everything alone..."

"No matter how strong you are, you won't be able to help the professor like that."

"Hehehe~ We all believe that teacher will definitely be able to bring the professor back safe and sound."

Even Lynn, Cecil, and Teresa were no different.

"Y-you guys...? Why would you all go to such lengths for Celica...?" Glenn was flabbergasted by the students, and unintentionally voiced a dumb question.

"Because, we are friends!"

"...Ah."

Kash's candid answer made Glenn realized it. Just as when the students came to accept him, they have also come to accept Celica.

"You guys..." Glenn gazed at his students for a while, with his heart filled with warmth...

"...I understand, please lend Lumia and the others to me. I promise, I will definitely bring them back safely to you all... Of course, that is with Celica in tow."

After making his decision, Glenn turned and said.

"Please, help me, Lumia, Sistine, and Riel. Celica singlehandedly brought me up from when I was just a child. She is the only family I got, so..."

After hearing Glenn's sincere request, the three girls all silently nodded their heads in affirmation.



Chapter 5: The Storied Wraith

Under the crumbling starry night.

I reflected as I sprinted down the endless 'Corridor of Stars' alone, of the current me.

...

...The joyous days spent with Glenn has revived me to the world, through which, I regained parts of humanity that I had lost.

Although the days are far from calm, I still enjoyed the time together with Glenn.

However, the voice tucked away in the depth of my soul continued to pressure me toward the mysterious mission.

Is it really the time to play house?

Don't you still have things you need to do?

Complete your mission as soon as possible. Complete your mission!

Yet, I could not remember my mission.

As the happy days continued, the joy that I had felt slowly permeated my very soul drip by drip like poison. Before long, I was afflicted with the 'ailment'. It was an ailment that my lonely self in the past could not have imagined, and would surely have scoffed at in the days when I feigned fortitude - an 'ailment' so ridiculous that I would not have considered even in time of my greatest leisure.

But the truth is, I had contracted the 'ailment', and the more I regained my humanity, the greater the pain I felt.

Therefore...

"I... must keep on moving forward!"

While I ran, I slowly lifted up and gazed forward with my previously hanging head. In the far distant, I could see a similar portal to the one that had first brought me into the corridor.

"Glenn..."

Don't go. Come back. The voice of my beloved pupil resonated in my ear.

"...I'm sorry."

A portal of light, the exit to the 'Corridor of Stars', slowly came into sight. There...

"No matter what, I..."

I unhesitantly stepped through the doorway, and returned to the place I belong.



In the deepest recess of Taum Observatory - the large planetarium chamber.

Glenn, with the assistance of Lumia, activated Black Magic [Function• Analyze].

Tsk... What is all this? How is this in any way a 'simple planetarium device'?!

Having only now seen the incredible amount of undiscovered magic formulas hidden away in the planetarium device, Glenn could not help but break out in cold sweat. The construct of the formulas bore some resemblance to the magic scripts used by Glenn and the others.

If I have to describe this, it is like our modern magic language is merely 'inferior runes' to their 'superior runes'.

Although not entirely correct, Glenn did roughly describe the

essence of the difference. In a sense, from the vocabulary to the grammar, all the parts that the 'inferior runes' lacked were wonderfully included in the 'superior runes'.

The details aside, they were standing at the cusp of history. The 'sorcery' that lacked intelligible formulas - the greatest mystery of ancient magic, was revealed to be simple 'magic' under the auspices of Lumia. If Glenn wrote the findings in a thesis, it would certainly be the discovery of the century.

However, I have no plans to do something like that...

For the thesis to stand, Glenn would need to reveal Lumia's existence to the public. This alone made it impossible, as even if Glenn had the will, the Imperial Government would surely send men to silence him.

Glenn roughly browsed the formulas, and noticed that there are countless more functions to the planetarium device, so many that he could not take the time to identify them all. It was a project that would easily take many years, and Glenn neither had the interest nor the spare time to do so.

Following Sistine's instructions on the operation of the control panel, Glenn opened a portal of light identical to the one before.

Uncertain of what dangers would greet them on the other side, Glenn brought all sorts of tools and provisions in his backpack, and carefully stepped into the portal.

What greeted him on the other side was a darkness dotted with a myriad of twinkling stars. A mysterious, dream-like, and infinite space. Before him was a path made of the same light as the portal that extended as far as the eye could see, where any misstep may drop one into the ocean of stars.

I see... I remember Celica referred to this place as the 'Corridor of Stars', and I have to say it is a surprisingly fitting name.

Glenn and the others travelled down the path that Celica had

already taken, what came to be a long and arduous journey. In the end, Glenn and the others finish traversing the 'Corridor of Stars' and entered the portal on the far end.

"Wh-..."

The scene that unfolded before their eyes brought Glenn to a standstill.

As the doorway vanished behind the group, Glenn noticed a small stone tablet next to where the doorway used to be. The tablet was very similar to the control panel located in the large planetarium chamber, and to ensure their safe return, they should investigate the tablet immediately. However, the abnormal sight that stood before them made them momentarily forget their priorities.

Scattered all around them were countless mummified remains, with their faces twisted in horror and malice.

"Eek?!" Sistine shrieked after seeing the corpses, and tightly gripped Glenn's arm.

However, Glenn himself had no time to calm the terrified Sistine.

"W-what happened here?"

Glenn tried to calm his racing heart, and once again surveyed his surroundings.

They were standing at the center of a T-junction, where the ceiling, the walls, and the floor were all constructed with slabs of stone. It was a place completely different from the interior of Taum Observatory.

Then, Glenn dreadfully examined the corpses near his feet. From the tattered remains of their clothing and the staff clenched in their hand, it was quite clear to Glenn that...

"These guys are... magicians? All of them? But, their injury..."

The mysterious remains were all undeniably burnt or had

otherwise incurred horrendous slashes with parts of their body cleaved off. These severe wounds were likely the cause of their untimely demise. But, regardless of how they died, one thing was painfully clear...

They were killed... by whom? What exactly happened here? From the state of their remains, they should have been killed ages ago.

"Ugh..."

Suddenly feeling dizzy and nauseous, Glenn knelt onto the ground with his hand pressed hard against his head. The air was putrid, mixed with a strong scent of 'death'. Just by being there, Glenn could feel the heat draining from his body, as if his spirit and life were being shaved away. It was a place filled with unpleasantness...

"D-darn it..."

Glenn could not bear with the atmosphere, or rather, the absolutely horrid surroundings, and continued to tremble uncontrollably. To not mince words, they were essentially in 'hell'. A space filled with malice and death. An accursed space shrouded in miasma.

It was absolutely a place where the living should have no business - a place Glenn and others shouldn't have come. Within Glenn's heart, regret began to sprout independent of his sensibilities.

"T-teacher..."

R-right, as a teacher, I must not look too useless in front of the students.

Before the worried gazes of his students (With the exception of a certain someone), Glenn tightly clenched his fist and took a deep breath.

"Alright, let's head out! The sooner we find Celica, the sooner we

can ditch this disgusting place!" Glenn strengthened his resolve and gave a confident speech.

At that time, a slight shuffling sound was heard from far behind them.

"?!"

The group quickly turned their heads toward the sound. Glenn turned the light at his fingertip toward the source of the sound, and saw a woman with long golden hair crawling out from the corner.

"Celica?! Hey, what is wrong with you! Please get it toge-...!" Glenn dashed toward the woman, only to come to a stop after a few steps.

It was not Celica.

Slide...

That woman... was missing a left hand...

Rustle rustle...

...And she was missing the bottom half of her body, dragging along dried up entrails as she crawled.

Rustle rustle...

The woman crept up to the motionless Glenn. Her disheveled hair giving the appearance of a vengeful spirit, and glared with hate-filled eyes at Glenn and the others. Her eye sockets no longer had any eyeballs within, only two gaping holes with bottomless darkness in their place.

Fwoosh...!

The woman used her remaining right hand and approached Glenn at a rapid pace, and with a solid push, launched herself into the air.

"Ugh...?!"

The woman's hair, like living vines, twisted itself around Glenn's

neck and sealed his mouth. She looked intently at Glenn with her shriveled face.

"If it weren't for that woman!! If it weren't for that traitor!!" The woman shouted as her eyes filled with tears of blood.

N-not good. I can't chant any spells with my mouth sealed... and what is with this abnormal strength?!

The hair wrapped around Glenn's neck exerted considerable strength, so much so that Glenn felt her neck could snap at any moment.

"Get away from... Glenn!!" Riel swung her giant sword, fully intend to cleave the woman.

All of a sudden, countless arms burst out from the nearby wall, latched onto Riel, and dragged her back into the wall, leaving her completely immobilized.

"Ah? Ugh...?!"

Riel could not struggle free from the incredible strength of the arms that gripped her, and her body started to creak.

"I-it hurts! L-let me go!!"

"Teacher?! Riel?! Hmph... *Oh merciful light•Cleanse the filth-...*" Sistine hastily began to chant an exorcism spell.

However, the corpses next to her feet suddenly sprang into motion, and gripped her feet as they climbed up her back...

"?! Ahh!!" Sistine reflexively reacted to the touch of the undead, and broke her concentration, "N-no! No!! Let me go! Let me go!!"

Sistine completely sank into confusion. Under the circumstances, it was impossible to chant spells that demanded a high level of concentration and control. Yet, in their inactivity, more and more corpses began to awaken.

D-darn it, this is not good! If this keeps up... but, what can we do?!

Just as Glenn was about to fall into despair...

"Oh merciful light•Cleanse the filth•Purify the land!"

With a clear and resounding voice, the chant for the exorcism spell, White Magic [Purify•Light], was complete.

L-Lumia?!

Lumia was also completely surrounded by the spirits of the dead.

*T-to be able to complete a chant under such grueling conditions!
What incredible willpower!*

As Glenn stood dumbfounded by the fact, Lumia raised her left hand in a blinding flash of light, illuminating her surroundings.

Kyaa!!

The undead and spirits of the dead began to turn away, crying in sheer agony. As soon as her immediate vicinity was cleared out, Lumia took out a small flask of holy oil.

"Flames of exorcism•Bring peace to the dead•Guide their way!"

As the droplets of holy oil burst into flame, the bright orange flame began to stir with a roar. It was a flame that purified only the dead, leaving Glenn and the others unharmed.

Kyaa...

As the dead burned to ash, calm returned to the scene. Not a single dead was spared from the flames as the miasma slowly dissipated from the surroundings.

"Is everyone... alright?"

"T-thanks, Lumia."

"Mm. You saved our lives there."

Sistine and Riel both thanked Lumia for her actions.

"T-that was quite the surprise. I didn't know you were able to use such a high level exorcism spell like White Magic [Saint•Fire] that

were almost exclusive to powerful shamans." Glenn looked at Lumia with wide open eyes.

"Yes... as part of my education in the imperial household, I learned the spell from my mother." Lumia showed her treasured flash of holy oil to Glenn.

Alencia Oil, an expensive oil extracted from the flowers used in funeral rites.

"Lumia, this holy oil... Wasn't it the precious gift her majesty - your birth mother gave you as a protective charm? To think that you'd use..."

"Don't worry about it. After all, it is to save everyone from harm, I'm sure mother would approve." Lumia flashed a bright smile toward the apprehensive Sistine and then turned to Glenn.

"Let's continue, teacher. We still need to find Professor Arfonia." Lumia said with an assertive tone.

"Aren't you reliable?" Glenn gently pat Lumia on the head, "Sorry, to tell you the truth, I was completely frightened by those creatures earlier. But I won't let them get to me from now on, so please rest at ease."

"I believe in you."

The pair revealed a trusting smile to one another.

"For some odd reason, I feel like I am slipping more and more from my rightful place..."

"?"

Sistine let out a cold sweat while watching the scene unfold, while Riel just tilted her head in confusion.

After investigating the nearby tablet, Glenn confirmed that as long as they have Lumia's amplification, they could open the portal at any time. With that settled, they then proceeded deeper down the path.

It was not hard to find their way, as within the path covered by a layer of thick dust were fresh footprints, likely to have belonged to Celica. They followed the tracks down the pathway, crossing through a few room-like chambers, and navigated across a series of labyrinthine passageways, until finally reaching a long flight of stairs.

Still, that Celica... Where has she gone?

As Glenn and the others continued to follow the tracks, questions began to spring up in their minds. The steps Celica took were all without hesitation or pause, giving the sense that she had an inexplicable familiarity with the place.

But the questions does not end there, the structure had countless disk-like floors extending both ways, as if a 'tower' of stacked coins. When Glenn and the others arrived at the outer rim of a floor, they peered out from the balcony to survey the surroundings. As the cold breeze blew past the tower, Glenn found that the sun had supposedly set, and what greeted them was boundless night sky. Hanging in the center of the sky was a large pale moon.

"W-where are we?"

They could not see the bottom of the tower, with the floor down far below. From the looks of it, they had come to an incredible place.

"That and, what exactly is this 'tower'?"

Glenn could not answer Lumia's straight forward question.

At a glance, the 'tower' was as complicated as a labyrinth, as if to deny humans from approaching... but at the same time, it contained many residential spaces. No matter how you look at it, there were definitely inhabitants in the past.

It was a labyrinth, yet at the same time, a city. Glenn could not fathom the actions of the ancients.

Whoosh...

In the rooms and corridors, there were countless corpses of magicians sewn about. All of them, like before, had received fatal wounds. However, these corpses would occasionally reanimate, and alongside the vengeful spirits, attack Glenn and the others. The constant harassment made their journey a grueling one.

"Hiyaa!!"

With Riel's Sword,

"Keep them at bay • wall of tempest • Grant peace to those below! Lumia, now!"

...Sistine's Magic,

"Mm! Flames of exorcism • Bring peace to the dead • Guide their way!"

...And Lumia's Exorcism Spell, the undead were easily dispatched. A perfect teamwork of Riel, who knocked the approaching undead away, Sistine, who sealed their movement using [Storm • Wall], and Lumia, who used the holy oil to conjure up flames of purification. Carried on the Sistine's winds, the flames gently wrapped around each and every one of the undead and exorcised them. No matter how many undead assailed them, none could escape the flames of purification, and one after another were severed from the world and sent to the afterlife.

"I have to say, aren't you all impressive~"

Lumia's composure could not be overstated. Although her techniques were rough, she could remain calm and collected enough to accurately chant spells in the face of death - even in the army, there were few who could match her.

On the other hand, although Sistine lacks the mental fortitude of Lumia, her creative use of spells has resolved many dire situations, and could be said to have a genius level of adaptability.

However, the one who surprised Glenn the most was Riel.

During the time when she was with the Mage Corps, Riel was always overly aggressive and direct in her attacks. Now, Riel was better at working together with Glenn, shielding Lumia and Sistine from attacks as they completed their spells. This newfound emphasis on teamwork rather than personal valor was something impossible for Riel in the past.

Since arriving at the inside of the 'tower', they had been chasing Celica deeper than they had ever imagined. Without a doubt, Glenn would have never been able to make it so far alone.

Perhaps the day I yield the center stage to the younger generation will arrive sooner than I thought...

Glenn wryly smiled as he led the students forward.



Hours upon hours they walked down the tower.

Just as they were growing slightly groggy from the seemingly endless journey, a loud rumbling coming from ahead of them jolted them awake.

"!"

Before them stood an opened gothic door, beyond which was pitch black.

"Teacher?! That noise earlier was...?!"

"...Mm. It was probably Celica's magic... Perhaps she is in a fight?"

"Then let us hurry, teacher!"

By the footsteps on the ground, Celica had undoubtedly headed down the path.

The group picked up their pace and dashed through the gothic door.

"W-what...?!"

Through the door, Glenn and the others found themselves in a

large open space in the shape of an arena - a circular stadium with fires scattered across the field. On the far side of the arena was a massive stone gate glowing in a faint black light, and before the door...

"Hiyaa!!"

Celica was in combat against countless vengeful spirits and undead.

Looking upon the carnage, Glenn and the others could not imagine the depth of malice and terror that had permeated the space. The scene unfolding before them trivialized the combat they had experienced on the way. Endless corpses and vengeful spirits poured out from the ground and charged toward Celica, It was a scene straight out of purgatory.

However, the torrent of undead could not reach Celica.

With sword in her right hand, and magic in her left,

"Mph!!"

Celica unleashed dozens of sword flashes in the blink of an eye, and cut the approaching undead into pieces.

"*Get lost!*"

And then, using just two words to activate Black Magic [Plasma•Cannon], [Inferno•Flare], and [Freezing•Hell] in tandem, all upper B-class military-grade strategic spells, and enveloped the entire field. Thick stream of lightning, flood of scorching flame, and wave of crippling chill erased the massive undead army surrounding her.

Triple Harmonics. One of Celica's greatest techniques.

Standing atop the growing mountain of corpses and cutting down all challengers that approach, Celica's appearance was like a demon lord reincarnate.

"W-what incredible strength..."

"Is this Professor Arfonia's combat ability...?"

Celica's stunning display of might has rendered Lumia, Sistine, and Riel speechless.

What unbelievable power. As I thought, Celica really is incredible. Compared to someone like me, I doubt I could even graze her level with five or six lifetimes... but still...

Glenn gulped at the sight before them. Yet, a vexing feeling made Glenn furrow his eyebrows.

What is she in such a hurry for...?

Certainly, Celica was known for her highly destructive spells. Although they are all devastating spells, Celica gave off a certain transcendent beauty to them - like a pyrotechnic engineer creating a wonderful display of fireworks, such that even the destruction could be breath-taking.

However, the current Celica lacked her usual elegance. She was simply forcing her way through with brute strength, an asura bent on annihilation. Her current self truly was a perfect rendition of the rumored 'Ashen Witch'.

The piercing eyes of the countless undead remain focused on her and her alone.

"Oh, the hate! The hate we have for you!!"

"It is all your fault!! It is all your fault!!"

"You took away everything! You destroyed everything! Our glorious, peaceful, prosperous world. Everything! Everything! Everything!! All because of you!!"

"The unforgivable traitor!! Curse you! Curse you!!"

The bottomless resentment and hatred that were directed toward Celica would overpower any normal person.

"Too Loud! Shut up! Not my problem!"

""Ahhh!!""

However, standing before the oppressive and tangible hatred, Celica's powerful spells erased them with ease, not giving them even the opportunity to approach. The pillars of flame pushed out from Celica, reaching the high ceilings, obliterating all those who were closing in on her.

"How many times I have to say it! I don't know any of you, so get out of my way already!"

But the hatred continued to pour as neither side could come to an agreement. The countless undead quickly replenished their ranks, blocking Celica from her path forward, almost as if declaring to Celica that 'You will not pass'.

"Hmph. Just because of a few pointless lingering attachments, you stay latched onto the real world. Very well, I will be so kind and send you trashes to where you all truly belong!" Seemingly reached the end of her patience, Celica revealed an aloof air, and gently snapped her fingers.

All of a sudden, it has appeared. A massive black array of black light that crisscrossed on the ground as it drew itself, instantly forming a hexagram. Immediately, the field was dyed black, as if an illusionary hell has appeared.

"Hmph. This will be a one way trip to the abyss, enjoy!"

Ritual Magic [Gehenna•Gate]. It was a depraved magic that casted the souls of the undead into the abyss. Originally comparable to White Magic [Saint•Fire] for its use in exorcism, and was a method of dealing with the undead, the spell was declared as a forbidden magic because of its cruelty. To put it simply, unlike the white magic that returned the souls to the cycle, the forbidden magic forced the dead into an eternity of 'nothingness'.

"No! Nooo!!"

"Help me! Not there!! I don't want to go!!"

""Ahhh!""

The screams of the forsaken souls echoed in the chamber. The bottomless hatred quickly turned to fear and despair. The dead were helplessly dragged into the depth of the abyss. Their lingering grudge, their attachment to the real world, and their overwhelming resentment, none of it mattered. Everything was to be mercilessly swallowed by the abyss - by 'hell'.

In the end, an uncharacteristic silence returned to the chamber.

"Hmph... That's for needlessly obstructing my way..." Celica irritatingly muttered to herself.

All the hate and madness trapped in the space were cleansed, and now the field has returned to its original calm state.

Glenn hurriedly rushed over to Celica, who was standing in a daze.

"Celica!"

"...G-Glenn? How...?" Celica slowly turned her head.

In her gloomy visage, not an ounce of her usual attitude was visible.

"...W-why are you here?"

"That's what I want to say! Why did you run off to this place alone?" Glenn angrily shouted as he grabbed her by the shoulder, "I-I am not worried about you at all, but the students were worried sick! B-but I wasn't worried at all!"

"T-teacher, you said the same thing twice..." Lumia wryly smiled at the complaining Glenn.

"Either way, let us hurry back. Seriously, always making so much trouble..." Although appearing not happy about Celica, Glenn's emotions were suffused with relief.

"Hey, Glenn! Hear this! I finally... finally found it!" Suddenly, Celica revealed a forced smile, with little emotions behind it.

"Ah? Found? What did you find?" Wanting to quickly leave the accursed 'tower', Glenn vexedly replied.

"The 'leads' of the past that I had lost!"

"...What?"

The unexpected answer froze Glenn in his tracks.

"I have remembered. In the planetarium chamber at the depth of 'Taum Observatory', when that portal appeared, I have recalled figments of my past!" Celica excitedly approached Glenn, "I... I had gone through that doorway in the past, that 'Corridor of Stars'! It was definitely like that!"

Celica extended her arms to her sides, and performed a pirouette in joy.

"And... and! Glenn! Do you know where we are?"

"Umm... In a certain 'tower'?"

"Hehehe~ Actually, we are currently in the Underground Labyrinth below Alzano Imperial Magic Academy!"

"...Huh?!"

The Underground Labyrinth? Underground?!

Because of the sudden influx of information, Glenn had a tough time keeping up.

"And, this is the 89th level! I have used Black Magic [Coordinate•Detection] and confirmed the specific location, I am certain of it!" Celica passionately explained, leaving Glenn to his confusion.

"Don't you understand? I have easily bypassed the impossibly difficult 10th to 49th floor - the floors that I had come to call the 'Trial of Fools'!"

Celica's excitement was not without reason.

She had incessantly challenged the Underground Labyrinth, but

the endless and grueling journey, the countless guardians, as well as the myriad of fatal traps have prevented her progress. Additionally, the construct and the traps within the Labyrinth would time and time again change, rendering maps and teleportation spots moot. The very design meant to impede any meaningful progress, the so-called 'Trial of Fools'.

Of the many times Celica challenged the Labyrinth, she was constantly thwarted by the ever-shifting deterrents, and to this very day, was unable to pass through the 49th level. On days of poor luck, even passing through the 15th level proved to be an impossibility.

"49th Level... as long as I am able to break through that accursed 'Trail of Fools', I would be home free! Rejoice, Glenn! I am inches away from unveiling the truth of this Labyrinth!!"

This is the Underground Labyrinth? As in under the ground?! And if they were underground, what was that night sky they saw earlier from the balcony?

Why would the Taum Observatory be connected to the Underground Labyrinth below the academy, and what exactly was that planetarium device?

What was that 'Corridor of Stars' we crossed earlier?

Why was Celica so obsessed with the Underground Labyrinth? Or at a fundamental level, what exactly was Celica?

Glenn had a million questions in his mind...

...But none of the questions are important right now.

To Glenn, more than the answers to the mysteries, there was something much more important that needed to be done, and that was...

"As I expected. My past, my lost mission, my inexplicable immortality - they are all found in this Underground Labyrinth, just as the 'voice' had foretold." Celica continued to speak in riddles,

"Yes... I also, vaguely, remember that... 'door'!"

As if bewitched, Celica slowly drew closer and closer toward the jet black door.

"On the other side, I am certain... everything... my everything..."

"Stop." Glenn grabbed Celica by her hand, pulling her to a halt.

"G-Glenn...?" Celica turned to look at Glenn with puzzled eyes.

"...Let us go home, Celica."

"W-why? I am finally so close to find out about my true self."

"Although I don't know why you are certain that your past lie beyond that 'door', I do understand that..." Glenn paused for a moment, "Let me just say this to you straight. Celica, the past that you lost may have nothing good to it."

Glenn looked straight into Celica's eyes, and continued.

"On my way here, all of the dead spirits had an intense hatred to them. For the longest time, I could not figure out what filled them with so much hate, but after seeing your fight earlier, I am certain: The reason for their hate was you."

"...?!"

"You had heard their voices earlier as well, right? How horrible were the acts that you had committed to have driven them to such hate, I could not at all fathom."

"G-Glenn..."

"But, I don't mind it at all. No matter how much those lousy dead spirits hate you, you will always be my beloved... mentor. Nothing else matters."

"B-but, Glenn! I-...! I-...!!" Celica lowered her head in silence.

"Hey, Celica, let's go home. You already had done enough. Don't seek your past anymore. Just forget about it. No matter what kind of person you were before, I will always..."

Celica cut off Glenn's words...

"N-no..." Celica trembled as she replied, as if a child throwing a tantrum, "I can't do that! B-because, if that happens, I will forever be... alone..."

Celica seemingly wanted to say something, but stopped at the very last moment.

With that, Celica swatted away Glenn's hand and charged toward the door.

"Ah! Hey! Celica!!"

With her back to Glenn's sorrowful cries, Celica continued her dash to the door.

That's the door! Everything that I sought for so long is definitely behind that door!!

As Celica ran, she reminisced...

"Return thyself to the cycle of providence •..."

...About the four hundred years, about the never-ending, arduous, and painful days, about the countless times she sought to simply end it all...

"The five elements to the five elements •..."

...And about the 'voice' that had constantly propelled her forward.

One day, the voice that had always been whispering 'complete your mission', 'realize your destiny' and such, changed. It was a day Celica cannot forget, the moment ten years ago, soon after she had adopted Glenn and took on the position as a professor at the Alzano Imperial Magic Academy. Due to some task, she was down in the Underground Labyrinth. At that time, the voice called out to her...

Go to the deepest recess of the Underground Labyrinth... There, you will find you destiny.

Since then, Celica, as if possessed, challenged the Underground Labyrinth time and time again, to unveil the truth behind her four centuries of wandering... Such was Celica Arfonia's abnormal attachment with the Underground Labyrinth.

"Sever the links woven between images and truth!"

But, honestly speaking... to the present Celica, her real identity, her past, and her mission did not matter to her. Even without her previous memories, even without her past, and even without her mission, Celica was no longer alone, for she has Glenn by her side. She was now able to walk with another, toward a shared future. She no longer needed her past and mission to define her existence, nor felt unease by the loneliness. Therefore, what she currently sought was because of something else entirely.

"With this..."

Celica activated Modified Black Magic [Extinction•Ray]. The beam of light that erased all that crossed its path extended from her left hand, straight toward the door that stood in her way. For a moment, the world was dyed white by the intense light and heat.

As the beam dissipated, an uncharacteristic silence descended.

"H-how...?!" Celica stared at the sight before her eyes.

The door was without a scratch and remained ever steadfast before Celica, as if laughing at her ineptitude.

"How? How is it not destroyed?! Darn it! How could I get to other side of the door?!" Celica walked in front of the door, and with a heart filled with loathing, began to desperately bang on the door with her bare hands.

"...It's no use. This is not like you. How could you not notice something as simple as Etherio Coating? The constructs of the ancients could not be damaged by physical or magical attacks." Glenn chased up to her, and stopped her incessant thumping.

Glenn gazed up at the massive gate. The surface was packed

with etchings in ancient writing, mysterious symbols, decorations, and drawing, but none to immediately indicate the method to open the gate. Glenn himself felt it wasn't particularly a terrible thing to leave the gate locked.

"Unhand me! Unhand me, Glenn!! I-..."

Glenn pushed Celica, who was throwing a tantrum with bloodied fists, against the door. As long as it was not a contest of magic, Celica was just a simple girl. Her physical strength was no match for Glenn's.

"Give up... and forget about it." With his face close to hers, Glenn pleaded, "What is it that you are not satisfied with?! Celica!!"

"...!"

Glenn accusatory tone made the usually aloof Celica show an unexpected soft expression, and she meekly drooped her head in response. It was at that moment, when...

"Remove thy hands from the door, filth!"

A voice echoed from what seemed to be the depth of hell,

"Daws and guards shalt not passeth. Only citizens of the land and the sky shalt passeth. Thou doth not possess the qualifications!"

"Wh-...?"

Glenn and the others could not help but gaze toward the source of the sound. As if stepping out of the darkness, it has come to appear at the center of the arena. The mysterious existence was draped with a cloak of crimson red from head to toe, with his face hidden away by the hood. Black air oozed out from the seams of his cloak, as if darkness took on the shape of a human while sporting a robe. There was no doubt that the one who stood before them was a wraith.



D-darn...!

Seeing the appearance of the wraith made Glenn's heart curse his luck.

"Ah...?!"

"Teacher...! That being...!"

Sistine and Lumia also felt terrible vibes coming off the wraith. Even Riel was on her guard toward the new arrival, the tip of her sword trembling.

D-darn it!! T-that guy... is definitely bad news!

Glenn could tell from just a glance that the wraith was abnormally strong.

In the same way a normal citizen without an ounce of magic would feel standing before a powerful mage, Glenn could not help but feel the same sense of despair when facing the wraith. As an ex-mage, Glenn's instinct, honed through countless life and death battles, screamed to him. Before the wraith, any magic they could possibly use - including that of Celica's - were no match against him. The wraith was simply on a different level to Glenn's party.

"Ha! Who the heck are you?!"

However, the irony of the situation was that Celica did not seem to fear at all, nor did she realize how terrible the being that stood before her was. Celica's desire to open the door trumped her better judgment, leaving her without her usual calm.

"Forget it. At least you seem to understand words. Let me ask you then, how do you go about opening this blasted door? As long as you obediently tell me, I will leave you with your life."

"Thou art...?" The wraith seemingly had recognized Celica, and drew back some of his murderous intent, "I see thee hath returned. The only one worthy of being mine master, Heavens (Celica)!"

"Huh?"

Celica froze when her name was suddenly called out.

"I see thee not as the Celica I knoweth. Thou has't not the right to cross through this gate. Argal, prithee returneth the way thee cameth!"

"W-what are you saying?! You know of me?!"

"Begone. Thy current self doth not int'rest me."

With that, the wraith completely ignored Celica, and looked toward Glenn and the others. Without anyone noticing, two swords appeared in the hands of the wraith - a red one in his left, and a black one in his right. Just gazing upon the swords alone, Glenn and the others could feel the overpowering atmosphere.

"Daws. Thy lives art forfeit the moment thee trespass'd into the realm of the divine. Alloweth mine own blades end thee lot, and as the dead, still catch but a wink in the 'Tower of Breaths'!"

The animosity and murderous intent burst out from the wraith, as if an unstoppable torrent, and suffocated Glenn and the others with its incredible pressure.

"Eek...?!"

The terrified Sistine tightly gripped Glenn.

"Ahh...!"

Even the dauntless Lumia had colors drain from her face, trembling where she stood.

"Haa... Haa... Haa..."

While the emotionless Riel was completely pale, and began to hyperventilate.

Glenn had decided to retreat.

Celica! Let us...!

Glenn signaled Celica with the intent of having them 'buy some

time for the students to escape'.

"Hey, don't ignore me!"

However, Celica completely ignored Glenn's intent, and charged headlong toward the wraith.

"I had it! If you don't want to tell me, I will just have to force it out of you!!"

"Idio-...! Stop! Celica!!"

Celica has completely ignored Glenn, and began to chant magic.

"Die!"

Black Magic [Prominence•Pillar]. Bright red pillars of flame rose up, and consumed the wraith.

"Mere child's play..."

With a single wave of the sword in his left hand, the wraith sliced the magic in two.

"To beest companions with daws, how weak has't thee gotten. Whither gone the proud 'king's sw'rd'? Hast the previous thee perish'd?"

Wh-?! What did that guy just do?!

Glenn was startled by the sight. From the surface, all that happened was that Celica's spell got nullified. But for Glenn, a veteran mage that survived through countless battles, his intuition screamed that it was something more. Yet, despite his misgivings, Celica continued to charge at the wraith.

"Ha! Your counter-magic is pretty good!"

"No, Celica! Do you not understand?!"

The problem was that Black Magic [Prominence•Pillar] was a B-class military-grade spell. As far as modern military-grade spells were concerned, there was no way to nullify a B-class spell, and

have to be taken by defensive spells. In short, offensive spells that surpass a certain grade could not be nullified.

"That is not some simple counter-magic! It is something more...!"

But, with blood rushing into her head, Celica could not take in Glenn's warning...

"Hyaa!!"

With her mithril sword, Celica leapt straight into the wraith. Having had already activated [Load•Experience], Celica now took on the skills of the famed "Sword Princess" and became an unmatched swordswoman. In her current form, there should be no one able to win against her.

"Let me take off that prideful head of yours! Hopefully with just your head, you will finally be obedient and answer my questions!!"

Celica approached like a gust of wind at ready to strike.

"To rely on borrow'd arts. Art thou not ashamed?"

The wraith stepped into the approaching Celica, and once again swung his left sword.

Ding!

With a sharp ring, Celica's sword clashed with the wraith's blade.

"Wh-..." Immediately, Celica let out an unexpected gasp, "H-how could this be?"

She could not hide her surprise, and pointed her sword straight at the wraith. However, her poise no longer had the air of the strongest swordswoman.

"W-why has my spell been dispelled? W-what did you do?!"

"I has't in mine left hand the r'd magic, Wi•Zayer... Thy tricks art useless ere me." The wraith turned to look at Celica, and warned her, "I has't deep respect to the real owneth'r of the sw'rd. From thy attack earli'r, I wast able to und'rstand. The owneth'r of the sw'rd

may hadst longeth been dead. F'r a foolish human, a m're mortal, to reacheth such aspiring heights..."

The wraith drew a circle above him with his blade, as if offering his prayers to someone.

"Although I am of the sky, I couldst not holp but beest aw'd by the arts within the sword..."

With that said, the wraith entered a stance with both of his swords, "Argal, I doth not permit thee to sully the sw'rd any longer, Heavens! How far shalt thou falleth? I couldst nay longeth'r hide mine disappointment in thee..."

"Darn it...! *Hammer of the Thunder God!*"

Leaping back, Celica raised her left hand, and chanted Black Magic [Plasma•Cannon]

"Once again, child's play..."

With a single swing of his sword, the lightning that approached the wraith was easily cut down.

Immediately afterwards, the wraith dissipated into smoke, and reappeared behind Celica. With terrifying speed, he swing his right sword down.

"Tsk!"

At that moment, Celica forcibly responded by turning her body in the air, and was planning to dodge the blow. However, despite her best efforts, the wraith's blade barely managed to nick her.

"Haa?"

When she received the injury, Celica felt the sensation of her soul being torn away. Immediately, Celica's limbs turned weak and, no longer able to support her weight, made her collapse onto the ground.

"W-what? What happened to my strength?"

"I has't in mine right hand the r'd magic, Sou•Lter... Those who art injur'd by the blade shall beest feeble."

The wraith walked next to the defenseless Celica, and brought his right blade to her neck. Without any means to resist, the air around the wraith became more pronounced, in a way that clearly demonstrated his superiority.

"Uwaaa..." Celica trembled with the blade to her neck. Without the strength left to lift even a finger, Celica could only meekly accept her fate.

"I has't misjudg'd thee. Thou art not worthy to beest mine master, disappear from mine sight."

"!!"

Celica stared helplessly at the edge of the blade. With only a gentle nudge, Celica's head would be cleanly detached from her body, and with it, her life will end. Despite always worried about her immortal self, Celica was now face to face with death.

However, at her end, all that appeared in Celica's mind was the time spent with Glenn, the ten or so years of mundane life.

"Ah..."

A thought that had never cropped up in the four hundred years, or rather, she had always sought the opposite of that thought. But at this junction, why would that thought appear?

"I... don't want to die..."

At the sudden realization, tears began to pool in the corner of her eye.

"N-no... I-... still..."

If I had knew I would die in a place like this, for such a pointless reason... what was I so obstinate for?

"Utt'r disgrace..." With his last words of criticism, the wraith lift his sword for the swing.

S-save me... Glenn...!

Celica thought of Glenn in her last moment, with her eyes tightly closed as the icy blade came down to take her neck.

"Get ahold of yourself! Darn it all!!"

With half a dozen shots, six flashes streaked across the air. Glenn had unloaded his clip onto the wraith.

"Geh...?!"

Taken by surprise, the wraith was pierced through the heart by a bullet that had snuck past his defenses. He then immediately swung his blades with blinding speed, creating five streaks of light that struck down the remaining bullets - a truly stunning display of agility and swordsmanship. He then leapt toward the ceiling, pulling some distance away from Glenn.

"Celica, are you alright?" With the wraith backed off, Glenn quickly made his way in front to cover for Celica, his eyes constantly locked on the enemy.

"What curious weapon thou has't..." The wraith remained cautious of Glenn, and held his blades at the ready, "A magic tool that us'd explosive magic to propel pellets of metal? M're third-rate toy, bethink not 'twill w'rk again."

The wraith remained standing. Glenn's attack earlier seemed to have no effect at all.

"Darn it, why are you still alive?! I clearly shot you through the heart!!"

Somewhat vexed at the ineffectual attack, Glenn quickly ejected the cylinder of his revolver, dumped the spent cartridges, and then refilled the chambers with new bullets. Sadly, there was no way the wraith would kindly wait for Glenn to finish.

"V'ry well! Alloweth me see how far the daws has't achiev'd in their senseless struggle!"

With speed that seeming part space itself, the wraith only took one step to close in the entire distance between Glenn and him.

N-not good!!

Glenn had no time to finish loading his revolver. Standing well within striking distance for his two large blades, the wraith was just about to cut down Glenn...

"Sisti!"

"May the storm gather•Form a hammer of war•Smash all before me!" Sistine quickly chanted the spell with Lumia next to her, hand in hand.

Sistine's Black Magic [Blast•Blow] smacked against the wraith towering above Glenn. With Lumia's amplification, the hammer of wind was at its peak power, and with the might of destruction, crushed the wraith beneath.

"...Child's play."

Once again, their magic dissipated upon touching the edge of his left blade, turning from a powerful blast to a mere breeze.

"No way! It won't work even with Lumia's amplification?" Sistine let out a cry of despair.

At the same time, Riel was on the other side...

"Not a problem! Hiya!!" With the opening, Riel leapt toward the wraith, swinging down her large sword with all her might.

However, the wraith was as swift as ever, with his left blade to catch Riel's blow, his right blade moved to bisect Riel.

"Hngh!?"

Riel's sword suddenly shattered to shards and obscured the sight of the wraith. Her magic sword was made through alchemy from the stones outside the observatory, and upon contact with the wraith's left blade, would disintegrate to its original components. Riel took advantage of his magic to blind the wraith for the

moment, and precisely in this moment, Riel unleashed her real attack.

"Hiyaa!!"

It was the mithril sword lying beside the crippled Celica, which Riel picked up on her approach. With the sword held in reverse, Riel spun her small frame like a whirlwind from bottom up, and delivered a slash from the wraith's right waist through his left shoulder.

"Ugh?!"

Riel's powerful cut sliced deep into the wraith, and sent him reeling into the air. A blow so strong, it created a blast wave that blew past Glenn and the others half a second later. Taking such a terrifying blow was undeniably fatal, and the wraith was likely done for. But, as with before...

"...Commendable."

With a sigh, the wraith gently landed at a point far away from Glenn and the others.

"Unexpectedly, I hadst endur'd two hits from daws. Looks liketh I still needeth training."

The wraith held his two blades at the ready, and slowly approached Glenn and the others. From a glance, the attack seemed to have once again failed to do any lasting damage.

"Seriously, aren't you working a bit too hard? It doesn't hurt to rest a little, you know." Glenn derided the wraith as he raised his loaded revolver.

Within, Glenn was hastily sorting out the information he have on the wraith in his mind, with cold sweat pouring out from all over his body. From what he gathered, the wraith's left blade was able to nullify any magic on mere contact, which meant using magic against him was pointless. On the other hand, his right blade could render anyone it touch immobile, likely an attack that directly

interfered with the spirit. Although simple, it was an exceedingly problematic move. At the same time, no matter how heavy an injury he sustained, he could not be felled. All that was then combined with the wraith's innately superb martial arts, who could use the two blades to their utmost.

No matter how you look at it, this thing is the strongest possible mage killer...

The wraith was simply too strong, and there was no weaknesses for Glenn and the others to exploit. It was simply the type of enemy that was the worst match up for Glenn. At that moment, victory against the wraith felt like no more than a pipe dream.

"I am coming, daws. Taste mine attack... \$!@%..."

Also, what is with that spell?!

With unknown words, a large spherical fireball slowly appeared above the wraith, which brightness and heat rivaling the sun, dying the entire area pure white. Feeling the intense blaze trapped within, Glenn was hard pressed to describe the object as anything but a miniature sun. It was a spell that Celica's greatest fire magic, Black Magic [Inferno•Flare], could not compare.

"N-no way! H-how much magic power do you have?!" Glenn was completely stunned by the display of might. Certainly, the wraith was strong by itself, but now he had stepped beyond the realm of logic.

It can also use magic unknown to man? Isn't that just straight up cheating?!

In that moment, Glenn hesitated to pull out his *Fool* tarot card. With the wraith still in the process of casting his spell, as long as Glenn activate his unique magic [The Fool's World], he could easily seal the spell.

But even if I seal his spell, what good would that do?

All that was left to Glenn would be his fists and gun, in addition to

Riel's sword. With all magic sealed, even Lumia's skill would become moot. In short, while they would be able to avoid immediate death, without any combat potential, they could not avoid it for long.

In his hesitation to activate [The Fool's World]...

"...%!#@#. Die."

The wraith had completed his chant.

"Darn it..."

Boom! The miniature sun above the wraith's head glowed brighter and brighter. Its intense heat and light robbed Glenn and the others of their sight, slowly swallowing and erasing everything in its path.

...

"...Hmm?"

Just as everything was about to end, the world lost its color and sound. The wraith and the sun above him also froze. Everything has turned to a shade of gray... with only Glenn and the others unaffected.

"W-what is this?"

"Teacher? T-this is? What exactly happened?"

The development that exceeded their understanding made Glenn and the others sunk into confusion.

"...Hurry, everyone, over here!" A voice came from behind.

Glenn and the others quickly turned to the source of the voice, and the sight made their heart skip a beat.

"Wh-...?"

"I could not keep it activated for long, so hurry up and leave!"

Before them was a young girl. Her hair ashen white, and her eyes shone like red coral with a dark hue, all the while dressed in a thinly

veiled dress. On her back were a pair of wings clearly not of this world.

"What are you waiting around for? Hurry up! That guy will never forgive foolish humans that wandered into the realm of the divine, and will chase you to the end of the world! So..."

"Y-you are...!" Glenn had seen her before, "At the first ritual chamber, below the statue of the Twins of the Sky, Taum. So you were not a mere hallucination?!"

"Hmph, humans are really foolish. They'd readily fool themselves when met with something they cannot explain, and refuse to see for what it is... Really, complete fools." The young girl looked at Glenn with belittling eyes, and let out a small scoff.

"Umm, who exactly are you...?" Sistine nervously asked, "W-what is happening? And why do you..."

It was not something only Sistine noticed, but by everyone present.

"W-why do you... have the same face as Lumia?!"

Just as Sistine asked, the young girl's face looked identical to Lumia, almost from the same mold.



Chapter 6: Nameless (Namenlose)

"...Me? Just call me Namenlose for now."

Under the lead of the young girl identical to Lumia, Glenn and the others departed from the arena. Because of their nervousness and worry, the group kept running for a long time to make some distance with the wraith. After a while, the group finally was far enough to take a gentler pace. It was at this time that the young girl responded to everyone's questions.

"...Namenlose, is it?"

The obvious fake name could not help but make Glenn sigh.

The gray world where everything has frozen long returned to normal. The surrounding was a darkness where they could only rely on magic to illuminate. On Glenn's back was the unconscious Celica. Glenn himself was jogging immediately behind Namenlose, with Lumia next to him and Sistine closely behind. Riel, who was tasked with being the rearguard, carefully surveyed their back. Her face was full of fatigue.

"I could save you all, so follow me."

Such was what the mysterious Namenlose said.

As far as whether they should trust her words, Glenn thought it was alright. After all, if she really planned to harm them, there was no need to interject at the moment of their death. That and given the length she went through to help them, her words were probably the truth... probably.

However, the questions remained.

"Hey... who exactly are you? And what are those bizarre wings?"

Why are you helping us? Who was the wraith earlier and what was that thing that turned the world gray? Why do you know about us? Hey, why do you look identical to Lumia? What relationship do you have with her?"

"..."

Namenlose just remained silent at Glenn's barrage of questions, and shot Glenn an irritated glance. Clearly the two were on different wavelengths. No matter the question, the mysterious girl did not give them any answer.

"Tsk... What a cold person..."

Other than the odd wings on her back, she looked identical to Lumia. However, her demeanor and attitude were completely different from Lumia - it contained a certain weariness, disappointment, and depression. If one have to put it to words, Namenlose gave off a somber air...

"Really, although you look the same, you have such a bad attitude... If you keep on like this, you'll die an old loner~"

To everyone's surprise, Namenlose seemed to be especially irked by Glenn's comment, and quickly refuted.

"That's a bit too much, you know. I have my own reasons why I cannot reveal the answers to you."

"And that is?"

"You don't get it? It's not that I don't want to say, but rather that I can't. If I give you a proper answer now, it will be problematic in the future."

"Ah...?"

"Sometimes ignorance is bliss, and knowing too much is disastrous. That and, I originally didn't even plan to reveal myself to you, if anything, consider the most that I can do is pull you all out of this predicament. Now, do you understand?"

Although she said that she didn't plan to show herself, why did she reveal herself to Glenn in the ritual chamber?

"...Really, I can't figure you out, you fake Lumia."

"Fine. Let me tell you what I can... of things about me."

Namenlose began to explain, "The current me is somewhat like a will that exist within the spirit veins. My physical body had long disappeared, so my current body is like a physical body, but at the same time not. How to put it, in a way, your earlier description of me as a hallucination is not completely inaccurate."

Glenn could only furrow his brows and sigh. It was not what he wanted to know.

"Because I am a will that exists within the spirit veins, I could materialize at any ruins across this country. Such is my nature. So? Does that sate your curiosity?"

"Yeah, it *really* sates my curiosity. No need to say more." Glenn clicked his tongue, clearly irritated by the unnecessary answer.

"That's not nice, teacher. Don't be so mean to Namenlose-san..."

"Hey, Lumia! Why are you defending this suspicious fellow?" Lumia's considerate nature made Glenn sigh.

"That and, look, that fellow's bizarre wings. What is with those? Just looking at those disgusting things make me want to puke." Glenn looked disgusted when gazing upon Namenlose's unnatural wings.

"Ah? 'Disgusting', is it? Although I admit the shape is a bit odd..."

"Teacher, you seriously have some weird prejudices. How could you ever call them 'disgusting'? Rather, they look like a pair of butterfly wings, and are really pretty."

While Lumia tilted her head in puzzlement, Sistine could not help but berate Glenn.

"Ha?! Pretty?! That thing that looks like jumbled eels? Did you get your head stuck in a door?"

"Seriously, teacher. What the heck are you saying? Are your eyes made out of glass?"

Glenn and Sistine once again began their verbal jousting.

"Sorry about it, Namenlose-san. Our teacher is just restless from trying to save us, his usual self is actually very gentle."

"I know."

Not sure why, but Namenlose replied to Lumia in such a way.

"That and, I haven't had the opportunity to thank you. Namenlose-san, thank you for rescuing us."

Suddenly, Namenlose stopped her footsteps, and the others also came to a halt.

"Although I do not know why Namenlose-san shares my face, but perhaps because we look alike that I feel a sense of familiarity with you."

"..."

"Could we possibly be sisters in another life?"

It was not an attempt at flatter or mere rhetoric, Lumia only said her own honest thoughts.

However, Namenlose suddenly leapt next to Lumia.

"I, on the other hand, hate you the most, Lumia." Namenlose stared at Lumia with eyes filled with hate and animosity, "To call us sisters, do you know how nauseous I felt hearing that? Of the five of you, only you I did not want to rescue."

The sudden onslaught of hate made Lumia completely bewildered, and just stood there motionlessly. With atmosphere suddenly growing tense, Sistine held her breath, Glenn reached for his pistol, while Riel readied her mithril sword, ready to pounce at any time.



"Don't worry about it. I have no plans to harm her... or rather, my current self could do nothing to her, just letting some of my pent up anger out."

She glanced at Glenn and the others preparing for combat, then returned to stare at Lumia.

"Although I know it is not fair for me to admonish at this moment in time... but, I couldn't hold it in... if it weren't for you...!!"

With that, Namenlose didn't look at Lumia again, and continued to lead the group forward.

"You... are really a gentle person, Namenlose-san." However, despite what had transpired, Lumia said to the lonely Namenlose.

"Why would you think that...?"

"Because, even though you hated me, you still decided to rescue me."

"That is just because it's convenient... that's all."

"Because I do not know why you hate me so much, I could not simply apologize, since there won't be any honesty to the apology." Lumia looked to the back of Namenlose, and said with conviction, "Therefore, at least let me give you my thanks..."

"..."

"Thank you for rescuing us."

Suddenly, as if merging into the darkness, Namenlose slowly became transparent.

"H-hey!"

"...I will need to disappear for a while to collect myself." Namenlose coldly said to the nervous Glenn, "Don't worry about it. I am everywhere in this place you call ancient ruins. You only need to follow my directions earlier, till then..."

With her final words, Namenlose completely disappeared.

"Seriously, what exactly is that fellow?" Glenn could only shake his head.

He couldn't seem to make head or tails of the situation, it was at this time that he felt something stir on his back. Behind him, Celica seemingly had recovered a bit of her consciousness.

"G-Glenn...? W-where are we?"

"Celica, are you awake now?" Glenn let out a sigh of relief.

Celica's recovery made Sistine, Lumia, and Riel regain a bit of relief as well.

"Hey, how are you feeling...?"

"...Terrible."

Celica exhaustedly laid her head on Glenn's back, and said without any strength.

Lumia has long healed Celica's injuries on her back, but Celica's condition remained dire.

"That mysterious wraith's blade seemingly absorbs the soul of those it cut, and turns it into power. My soul, or rather aether body, had been greatly consumed."

Finally, one of the mysteries to the wraith's abnormally strong magic was solved. The more it damaged its enemy, the stronger itself became.

"Damage to the aether body could only rely on natural healing... but, with such a heavy wound, I probably... will never be able to use magic again... Hahaha..."

"...Don't be absurd." Glenn, however, wasn't completely dismissing her thoughts.

Damage to the soul was a fatal blow for any magician. As magicians rely heavily on their souls to cast magic, the condition of their soul, or aether body, was critical. Even if the damage won't completely preclude Celica from using magic, it would

nevertheless severely impair her abilities.

For the next few moments, silence descended upon the group, and each continued to move forward mechanically down the path. The only sound that could be heard was the echoes of their footstep. Suddenly,

"Say, Glenn... where is that fellow? That wraith, what happened to it?" Celica broke the silence.

"We have somewhat managed to lose him for now, someone called Namenlose rescued us.

"...Namenlose?" The unfamiliar name made Celica furrowed her brows, "Who is it? That and, other than us, there is someone else here?"

"Hmm, how to say this... I am not sure how to explain it myself. It is a strange looking fellow who suddenly appeared before us, and... Hey! Namenlose? Are you listening? Come out here for a second!" Nothing responded to Glenn's words, "...? Still hiding? What is that fellow up to..."

Even after waiting for a while, Namenlose did not appear, all to the annoyance of Glenn.

"Haa... Forget it. Although I don't believe there could be anyone else here other than us, but as long as you trust it, then I don't... mind..."

Cough.

At this time, Celica started to cough vigorously. Likely because of the severity of the injury to her aether body,

"Hey! Celica, are you alright?"

"I am fine. What I wanted to say is..." Celica paused for a moment, seemingly readying her heart for what is to come, and then clearly announced, "I am just a burden like this... Leave me here."

Glenn did not know how to respond to Celica's request.

"In my current condition, as you have seen, I doubt I could even walk for myself..."

The usually confident and awe-inspiring tone had turned incredibly feeble. The one on Glenn's back was no longer that peerless magician, but a girl who was weak, hurt, and apprehensive.

"...How could we leave you and run, dummy."

Glenn disapprovingly refused Celica's request.

"From the pace, I presumed the wraith is bound to give chase?"

"If what Namenlose said was true, then that fellow is quite the stubborn stalker. It would chase us, who trespassed in that arena, till the end of the earth. However..."

From the limited information given by Namenlose, That wraith seemingly was restricted to the Underground Labyrinth between floor 50 and 89, the 'guard station', and could not leave the territory in which it was left in charge.

"In other words, we should be fine as long as we get out of this lousy Labyrinth. Namenlose said she is leading us to the closest teleportation site from the arena."

"Then, it is even more important that you leave me..." Celica feebly gripped Glenn's shoulder, "With me like this, the speed... and combat... both will be untenable for the group."

"Mm. You are correct."

"...Right? Then-..."

"Still, I refuse." Glenn continued to carry Celica without the slightest hesitation in his footstep.

"Then make it a request. I ask you to at least listen to me this time... If we keep this up..."

"Argh... Just be quiet, how bothersome!" Glenn simply refused, and stomped forward, "I will definitely bring you back! Take you out of this lousy Labyrinth! This plan is not subject to debate! It is the order of the expedition leader, so your objection is moot, dummy!"

Celica shrunk back at the angry response from Glenn, and simply stared at his back.

"W-why, for someone like me...?"

Upon hearing Celica's enervated whisper,

"Because you are family!" Glenn angrily shouted, "If our roles are reversed, you will definitely do everything in your power to bring me back, no matter how low the odds."

And then, after lowering his voice back to normal, Glenn declared.

"Family, isn't it what that means?"

"Glenn..."

Celica placed her surprised face back onto Glenn's back,

"Are we... really family?"

"Other than that, what else could we be?"

"Really? Really?!"

"Stop being so annoying, didn't I already say so?"

"Yes... I see... We are family... Hahaha... Uuu..."

After the exchange, Celica let out a deep sigh, and started to silently cry on Glenn's back.

"Why would you cry?"

"To tell you the truth... I... was always worried that my thoughts of 'family' were purely one sided..."

"Dummy, why would you ever think like that?"

"Because, no matter how you look at it, I am clearly not human..."

"Huh?!"

Celica finally, in broken words, spoke the words she had kept hidden for so long.

She spoke of her four hundred year long journey, of the worry, loneliness, and the endless struggle on her path of destruction. She then talked about the 'voice' that guided her and the mysterious sense of mission. Then, the day in which the 'voice' changed - the day soon after she had adopted Glenn and came to serve as a professor at the magic academy, where she was tasked with the exploration of the Labyrinth and took her first step into the structure. The day when the 'voice' told her to seek her destiny in the deepest recess of the Underground Labyrinth.

"And so, you stubbornly challenged this lousy Labyrinth time and time again? All because of some 'voice' telling you to...?"

"...At first."

"At first?"

Celica's odd answer made Glenn confused.

"At first it was certainly because the 'voice' told me to... but, as for my current self, I no longer had any desire to complete the unknown mission."

"Then why would you keep doing something so dumb?"

To Glenn's question,

"B-because, I am afraid..." Celica answered in a tiny whisper, "The joyous days I had spent with you... made me more and more afraid... Because I will never age, because I am an 'immortal'... the time I have and the time you have are completely different... that you and I are different. I would painfully realize every time I see you grow, that 'you and I are different'."

Yes, because of that...

"And so, I thought, do you honestly see me as family...? Would

you recognize someone who is not human as family...? And with that, think that you only stayed by my side out of pity..."

This was the 'ailment' that Celica contracted through her long years of loneliness.

"Glenn... I..."

Celica used her thin arms to hug Glenn from the back, and dug her head into the back of Glenn's head, allowing Glenn's body heat to be transmitted to her.

"What 'voice'... what forgotten mission... all of it doesn't matter at all... as long as... I can stay with you... I will be satisfied."

"..."

"I want to live in the same time as you... to become the same 'human' as you..." Celica gave a soft, yet sad whimper.

It made Glenn, who now understood everything, close his eyes and grit his teeth.

"So that is why... right?"

Celica challenged the impossible Labyrinth to find the answer to her immortality, to turn her from an 'immortal' to a 'human'. From what Celica understood, this 'immortality' was intricately linked to her lost mission. Therefore, all she had done was for the desire to be recognized by Glenn as human - to be recognized as his family.

The reason for her desire to tag along during the expedition to Taum Observatory was for the same reason. Because the ruins were rumored to contain a spatial-temporal device, or in other words, an ancient device that uses time magic, Celica, who was stuck with her numerous attempts at the Underground Labyrinth, sought after an alternative to help illuminate her mysterious immortality.

In all honesty...

"It was a dumb thought... completely and utterly, dumb." Glenn declared while trembling in rage.

"...Glenn?"

"...Why would you ever be bothered by such silly matters? And the me who never noticed how you felt? It is completely ludicrous! Darn it...! Darn it all...!!"

Speaking of which, their relation was always like this.

When Glenn grew to hate magic due to a certain incident, Celica also came to believe she was hated, and decided to forcibly make Glenn into a teacher. Her hopes were that Glenn would regain his youthful love of magic.

Celica Arfonia. Glenn had always looked up to her as the strongest magician - or rather, sorcerer. Even his desire to one day become the 'Sorcerer of Justice' grew out of his desire to become a sorcerer like Celica. For Glenn, Celica was so powerful that he couldn't hope to match even if he devote his entire life to study - an almost transcendent existence that paralleled the heroes of legends.

However, precisely because Celica was the strongest magician - the strongest sorcerer, Glenn overestimated her, and forgot that at her core, she was still just a woman. In the four centuries she wandered the world, her will had become brittle. It was a development that would surely have happened to anyone in her shoes, even for humans.

At the moment, Glenn did not have any good plan to completely eliminate her worries, nor could he acknowledge what she did as meaningful, therefore...

"You and I, we are family..."

Glenn could only declare that again and again...

"We are family, Celica. Other than family, what else could we be?"

No matter how many times it took...

"After all the time we spent together, why would you still be confused? Are you dumb? If you have worries, just tell me. To be troubled by such needless worries, aren't you the one that is overthinking it? How can you not understand something as simple as this?"

Again, and again...

"You are really a silly kid, or rather, how old are you this year? Seriously, a silly granny... Honestly, now I will need to have to take care of you as your family member."

Whenever she would feel worried, to say it to her...

"...Just stay like this, Celica. There is nothing to be worried about. No matter if you are 'immortal' or some other monster, no matter if you are some sort of demon, or even the demon lord... you will always be an irreplaceable member... of my family."

Glenn calmly said, with words full of emotion, until she could finally accept his feelings.

"Just staying like this, is that right?"

"Yes."

After listening to Glenn's words, Celica let out a long sigh.

"How could I not have understood something as simple as this..."

"...Celica?"

Celica once returned to her slumber.

"Really, such a worrisome person..." After letting out his frustrations, Glenn went back to properly carrying her as before.

Lumia and the others gently looked at the sleeping face of Celica on Glenn's back.

"Tsk... What are you kids looking at?" Glenn, noticing the gazes from his students, shyly turned away.

"...Thank you, Glenn."

"Uwa?!"

Namenlose suddenly appeared next to Glenn and surprised him.

"Dummy, don't scare me like that! Also, what is that 'thank you' for?"

"...Nothing." Namenlose turned her face to the side.



The group continued down the endless Labyrinth, constantly on alert for the terror that was approaching from the rear. They all hoped that the peace and calm would continue till the very end, but fate is a finicky mistress...

"...Here it comes."

"Yes."

Glenn and the others slowed their footstep, and looked out behind them. They could clearly sense a certain being of unimaginable and ominous strength was fast approaching.

"...It is still some distance away, but it will catch up for sure."

"Will we be able to throw it off if we move quicker?"

"No, our destination is still quite far. Although it will take less time than the time it took for you guys to get here from the arena, it will nevertheless..."

Then, the only possible plan was to... fight.

"I will try to delay him and cover our retreat, you guys take Celica for me, and escape this blasted Underground Labyrinth." Glenn seemed to be resolved to meet the wraith, and leaned the sleeping Celica on the nearby wall.

"N-no! The teacher must not be...!"

"That's right, what are you saying?!"

Faced with the strong refusal by Lumia and Namenlose, Glenn was taken by surprise.

"Glenn, you must not die here."

"Then what will you have me do?! If we do nothing, it will simply catch up to us..."

"T-that..."

"And when it does, it would end up wiping us all out. After all, we have no means to resist against its power. If I stay here, at the minimum I could buy some time, so you guys could..."

"Absolutely not! Both you and Celica must survive no matter what! I beg of you!"

"Against that immortal bastard, could you just leave the sleep talking to when you are asleep?!"

Glenn and Namenlose got into a heated argument, as their precious time continued to tick away.

"Even if you stay to delay it, it would definitely still catch up to those children and kill them."

"Then what will you have me do? Just stay here and die?!"

As the two were reaching a crescendo,

"...Teacher." Sistine, who had been quiet up till now, suddenly interjected with a determined look, "If there is no way out, then we might as well fight. With everyone together, we should challenge that wraith to combat."

For a moment, Glenn thought Sistine was completely taken aback by the fear and started to blabber nonsense.

"If everyone can work together to defeat that wraith, then everyone can return alive. That is the only proper way." Sistine declared with all her courage, with her shoulder and lips slightly trembling.

"Are you an idiot?! How could we possibly win?"

However, because Glenn knew of the unfathomable strength of

wraith, he was able to resolutely refuse Sistine's suggestion.

"If there really is even a slight chance of victory, I am certainly willing to contemplate your suggestion. But as it stands, even if his heart was pierced, even if his body was sliced, he will still be fine! Tell me, Sistine, how can we possibly win?"

"Glenn is correct,"

For some reason, Namenlose gave weight to Glenn's words,

"Regrettably, there is no one who can kill the wraith. Although I do not know the reason, that fellow has an immortal body, and will simply shrug it off no matter how many times he is fatally wounded." Namenlose's said with much conviction, making it difficult to argue against.

Yet, Sistine calmly dismantled their supposition.

"If I may, as far as that wraith's 'immortality', I think I could explain it away."

"...Ah?"

"Huh?"

Not just Glenn, but Namenlose also had her eyes wide open in surprise.

With that said, Sistine took off and rummaged through her bag.

"I thought it was useful as a reference book, so I brought it along. But never in my wildest imaginations that I thought it would be useful in such unexpected circumstances."

What she brought out from her bag was...

"...Ah? 'Sorcerer of Melgalius'? The book that Celica brought?"

"Yes."

Under Glenn's suspicious gaze, Sistine flipped through the book to a specific page...



Glenn took them to select their ideal battlefield for the decisive battle. In a certain recess of the Labyrinth, the place they selected was an open-air patio. The wide open space, with many narrow platforms stacked together, connected by complicated stairs. On the surface, there seemed to be ponds with fountains, and connecting channels in-between. Although the water has long dried up, it was not hard to imagine how beautiful the patio was in its heyday.

However, the sky is completely obscured by hemispherical stone ceiling. What a complete waste of a wonderful design. Rather than an open-air patio, it is more accurate to call this an underground patio.

"...Hmm? Glenn, are you alright?"

Riel stood next to the contemplative Glenn, with the mithril sword in hand. Sistine and Lumia nervously stood a fair distance behind, on raised platform roughly two to three yards above Glenn and Riel's platform.

"Ah? Everyone's ready for this?"

"Mm. Just leave it to me. I am Glenn's sword." Riel replied in a low whisper.

Sistine and Lumia also gave a nod.

After everything is set up, the overwhelming presence closed in on Glenn's group. Slowly and surely, the chill and sinister air grew more and more intense, until...

"To standeth 'gainst me, thou daws' courage art w'rthy of praise."

The wraith appeared before Glenn and the others, with his dizzying presence as pronounced as ever. Even just by standing in front of him, Glenn and the other's knees trembled uncontrollably, with streams of cold sweat pouring out from their back and foreheads.

"Although knowing thee cannot winneth, and knowing thee not

beest able to killeth me but beest killeth in rev'rse, thou still standeth 'gainst me. Foolish, but des'rving of respect. The least I can doth is alloweth thee a painless death."

Thump, thump, thump... The wraith slowly approached the stairs connecting to the wide platform, toward the battlefield Glenn and others prepared. Radiating from him, the crushing pressure that made people despair and their hearts scream out in agony.

"Is that so? I, on the other hand, think we have quite the good chance to win." Glenn used all his will to act carefree, and looked down upon the wraith, "After all, you bastard only have like... four lives left. Am I right?"

"..."

Glenn's curious outburst made the wraith pause his footsteps.

"If that's all, then we should be able to wrap this farce up in good time."

With a haughty pose, Glenn recalled the words of Sistine.



"...Before I talk about the wraith's immortality and weakness," Sistine paused her flipping through the pages, and changed topics, "Teacher, do you know of Rolan Etruria?"

Glenn furrowed his eyebrows at the seemingly pointless topic,

"Huh? Of course I know about him, but now is not the time to-..."

"It is very important, so please listen! Rolan Etruria, a famous modern archaeothaumatoologist, known as the father of archaeothaumatology. He devoted much of his focus on the Melgalius Sky Castle, and committed much research into the topic. Among his magnum opera were 'Melgalius Sky Castle', and 'Sorcerer of Melgalius'..."

"Yes, for a sky castle otaku like you, the former is basically a holy scripture, while the latter is a popular fairy tale known to all

children. He was both an archaeothaummatologist and a children's writer..."

Unable to gauge Sistine's intentions, Glenn could only keep the conversation rolling.

"Rolan's fairy tales were the result of the great lengths he went to collect the local legends and myths, as well as folk tales and songs, and then compiled with additions of his own insight. Of which, his magnum opus, 'Sorcerer of Melgalius' was the greatest of his collections, so much that one could say it was the greatest collection of ancient legends. In other words, before the fairy tale, it exists as a detailed reference to the ancient era."

"...And so?"

"As of such, soon after Rolan Etruria completed and published his 'Sorcerer of Melgalius', on his way to the neighboring Kingdom of Rezalia for an expedition, he was captured and sentenced to be burned at the stake by the Kingdom's Holy Elizareth Church."

"!!"

"The official crime was 'publication of heretical books, and corruption of the populace'. The church forcibly collected and destroyed all copies of 'Sorcerer of Melgalius' in the kingdom."

"T-that's a bit too much, isn't it? I have also read the book in my childhood. Isn't it just a simple children's book? I don't see any reason for the church to reject the book so strongly." Lumia sorrowfully said.

"Mm. No matter how you look at it, the proceedings were quite suspicious. It couldn't help but make people suspect there was a conspiracy, right?" Sistine's rhetorical question made Glenn sunk deep into thought, "Let me repeat again, 'Sorcerer of Melgalius'... was a compilation of the numerous fragments of the ancient civilization. In other words, it is not wrong to conclude that Rolan Etruria saw something forbidden during his study of the ancient civilization, and wrote it into his book, which led to his untimely

death."

"!!"

"Rolan's last words while he was burning on the stake was, 'The bishops are controlling all wisdom and manipulating everyone to their agenda. They will definitely lead the human race to destruction!'. Don't you think there is a deeper meaning to his words? He is almost saying that the 'Sorcerer of Melgalius' was the forbidden unabridged version of the holy book."

Glenn was seemingly ruminating over Sistine's words and kept silent...

"So a conspiracy. And what of it? How does it relate to the way for us to defeat the wraith?"

But in the end, Glenn just gave a futile smile.

"With that cleared up, I will now go into the main topic. As far as the wraith is concerned..." Sistine looked straight into Glenn's eyes, "A red blade that nullifies magic in his left hand, and a black blade that consumes soul in his right. A wraith that could not be killed no matter how many fatal blows. Doesn't all of this sound familiar to you? If you loved 'Sorcerer of Melgalius' as a child, I'm sure teacher should be able to remember..."

Sistine showed the page to Glenn. On it was a familiar scene where a dual wielding warrior stood facing thousands upon thousands of enemy. The picture, along with Sistine's hint, combined with Glenn's own memories of the book gave a sudden flash of inspiration.

"...Lord Al Khan of the Shimmering Blades!"

Within the characters of 'Sorcerer of Melgalius', there was the Demon Lord that stood opposed to the hero, and the 'Astral Lords' that served as his bodyguards. The Astral Lords served under the Demon Lord's direct command, each one of them with power beyond imagine. They were all originally humans, but later

discarded their human shell and took on various forms.

Among which, Lord Al Khan of the Shimmering Blades was a memorable curiosity. Although he serves under the Demon Lord, he was a character that was more of a demon than the Demon Lord himself. He was on an eternal quest for a worthy liege to serve, and have fought with countless champions, even occasionally crossing swords with the minions of the Demon Lord.

His greatest feature was the twin blades mentioned earlier, as well as the thirteen lives he gained through his thirteen trials. In other words, he could not be defeated until he was slain thirteen times.

"Hey, you can't be serious?! Isn't that just a simple fairy tale?! White Cat, are you really claiming that fellow is Al Khan of the Shimmering Blades?! It is really a bit..."

"I also know it sounds ridiculous! But, the similarity is a bit concerning, is it not? And is it really all just a coincidence? Haven't this already exceeded the realm of chance?!"

Sistine wasn't wrong. Could they really just write it all off as a mere 'coincidence'?

For most things, having one or two similarities could be construed as a coincidence, but when the similarities began to pile up, anyone would be hard pressed to say there isn't a pattern to be found. If they just write it all off as mere chance, then they would really be no different from 'fools'.

That and, just as Sistine had described earlier, 'Sorcerer of Melgalius' was not just a simple fairy tale. It was the collection of ancient legends that contained the spirit of the great Rolan Etruria.

"Teacher, could we not gamble on the possibility? If it really was Al Khan..."

In all stories, heroes and anti-heroes have their own weaknesses. As far as Al Khan of the Shimmering Blades was concerned, he was

the archetypical anti-hero, and by extension, there were appropriate methods to defeat him.

...What to do?

It was a gamble. To bet on the small chance that they were right, and 'defeat the wraith, so that everyone can return alive'. The alternative was to give up on the gamble, and at the cost of some lives, have rest escape from the Labyrinth.

Glenn looked at his students. Sistine, Lumia, and Riel all looked at him with resolute eyes.

We trust in your judgment.

We won't regret no matter how things turn out.

Their eyes seemed to confirm all these feelings. Sistine, Lumia, and even Riel had already fully steeled themselves for what was to come. With their help, if Glenn fought alongside them... Then perhaps...

"I... have a promise with those brats... that I would definitely bring everyone to safety. So, I..."

Before the girls, Glenn had finally made his decision.



I can't believe that I really made such a dangerous gamble.

Facing the wraith, Glenn's heart fluttered at his decision.

There was no way to confirm that the wraith really was Al Khan of the Shimmering Blades. If on the chance everything was really a mere coincidence, then the probability of them defeating the wraith would be zero. However, the complicated circumstances made it nearly impossible to discount everything as chance. As long as there is the slightest prospect that all of them will be able to survive, they had to take the gamble.

That's right... in the story, Al Khan of the Shimmering Blades, during his fight to recognize the Demon Lord as his liege, was killed four

times. Then, in his defense against the Sorcerer of Justice, he was killed three more times. In other words, he had already died seven times.

Glenn glanced at the wraith with all the emotion he could muster.

And then, with my bullet that pierced his heart, and Riel's fatal slash, it should be another two lives. If he started with thirteen lives, then the lives he has left should be...

Glenn faced off against the wraith, and purposely said in a conceited tone,

"After all, you bastard only have like... four lives left. Am I right?"

"..."

"Certainly, I alone could not hope to match the great heroes of a bygone age. However, I am not alone."

Glenn puffed his chest, and used his thumb to point at his reliable students.

"With their help - with the four of us together, we can defeat you. If you really only have four lives left, I have the perfect plan to take care of them, bastard."

Now, Glenn and the others waited for its answer. Honestly speaking, they could not confirm the fellow really was Al Khan of the Shimmering Blades. Therefore, the declaration of 'four lives' was only Glenn's own subjective desire. But, to obtain irrefutable evidence of its identity, Glenn had to perform this act.

Within his heart, Glenn was completely wavering, and he was already ready to rout. However, he did his best to suppress the urge, and on the surface, acted with full confidence to end its four lives...

With his fists raised, Glenn nimbly circled around to the wraith's right side, and thought...

Does my actions look like 'I know you only have four lives left, so I am just looking for an opportunity to strike'? For heaven's sake, please assume it as such!

If they only need to fatally wound the wraith four times to kill it, Glenn would do his best to fight. If not, then it would result in the worst case scenario. To obtain the necessary evidence, to know for sure that the wraith only has four lives left...

Come on... I hope my act really had the proper effect! Please, quickly confirm that there is a limit to your immortality... Come on!!

"..."

The wraith continued to size Glenn up without uttering a word.

The silence weighed on Glenn like a lead block, and made his stomach churn ceaselessly.

N-not good, cold sweat is coming...! Darn it, the act will fall apart at this rate...!!

Glenn's forehead began to gather droplets of sweat, and just as it was about to roll down his face...

"Excellent. Although I doth not knoweth how thee learneth of a secret not privy to mine liege... But, daws, doth thee most to struggle, and with all thy strength, killeth me four m're times." The wraith brought up his two blades, and said the deciding fact.

"...?!"

In psychological warfare, Glenn seemed to have triumphed. He was quite lucky that the wraith was just as the story described, one who was 'direct' in his confrontations.

"Hmph... That was my original plan. Do you best, and don't come crying foul when you lose." Under his confident expression, Glenn was ecstatic.

Awesome!! It is certain now! This fellow really is Al Khan! With that, we still have a chance at victory!!

On the other hand, numerous questions now began to pop up with that realization. Who exactly was Rolan Etruria, and what secrets has he uncovered in his years of researching the ancient civilization? And, above all else, were the Astral Lords not mere fictional characters? However, now is not the time to contemplate them.

"Alright, let's do this! Riel! Sistine! Lumia!"

"Mm. Leave it to me!"

Glenn and Riel leapt into combat, circling in from the left and right.

"We will take care of their support!"

"Mm!"

From the rear, Sistine and Lumia raised their left hands against the wraith.



"Oooh!"

"Yaah!!"

Glenn and Riel roared as they charged toward the wraith from both sides.

"Cometh!"

Faced with the onslaught, the wraith lowered his stance in preparation, and so the battle began...

"Haaa!!"

Glenn launched his attack from the wraith's right hand side,

"Hiyaa!!"

While Riel charged in from the wraith's left hand side.

It was a perfect pincer attack, like two streaks of light that came to a swift head-on collision.

"Oooh!"

With Lumia's 'Amplification', Glenn held his magic coated fists at his side,

"Ei!"

And Riel held on to Celica's mithril sword.

Both of their bodies was strengthened to their limits by the effects of a fully amplified White Magic [Physical•Boost] from Lumia, with their actions and reactions exceeded human limits.

"Hmph..."

But, the wraith's twin blades swung with elegance and might. The streaks of red and black cutting the view into parts. The wraith's left blade dealt with Glenn's fist, while its right blade dealt with Riel's sword. It easily blocked, parried, and countered the attacks that came from two 'enhanced' humans. Sparks flew between Glenn's fist, Riel's sword, and its twin blades, while the air filled with the

sounds of clashes.

"Oooh!!"

"Haa!!"

Glenn and Riel continued their relentless assault - sometimes in unison, sometimes in steps, they attacked, and attacked... and attacked.

However, the overwhelming existence only calmly neutralized their onslaught. He twisted his body slightly to dodge Glenn's right straight, then cut away at Riel's powerful slash, and then blocking Glenn's left jab, finally knocking away Riel's explosive projectile, all with the elegance of a dance.

Compared to the swift precision attacks favored by modern swordsman, or the overpowering blows favored by knights, the wraith's swordsmanship was like flowing water, smoothly transitioning from one stance to another that mesmerized onlookers with its grace.

The intensity of the combat, with the pressure of the blows, caused winds to blow out.

"Hmph!!"

"Hiyaa!!"

Glenn and Riel controlled the pace of the combat, locking the wraith in combat with their preferred arm - Glenn against the right, and Riel against the left. This formation was the bare minimum for the two to stand a chance against the overwhelming power, with the wraith's right blade, Sou•Lter, tasked to Glenn, and the wraith's left blade, Wi•Zayer left to Riel. The reasons were that although Glenn's fist was enhanced by magic with Lumia's amplification, if it ever came in contact with the left blade, the magic would be undone. While on the other hand, Riel only had a single sword compared to Glenn's two fists, and may struggle against the wraith's right blade, where even a single scrape could spell her

end. For the right blade, where it was not a danger as long as no injuries was inflicted on the attacker, Glenn was the better match for his two fists provide him with faster attack and response time. The formation, along with the tacit understanding they have gained fighting alongside one another during their time as mages, was the only thing keeping them from instant defeat.

However, the plan could all be undone if the wraith simply switch his two blades. Yet,

I don't think that would be a problem if we trust in White Cat's Intel.



"That plan won't work... While Riel and I could probably pull the formation off, if that bastard simply switched the blades in his hands, won't the plan just simply fall apart?"

Glenn and the others were in their battle strategy meeting.

"No, I do not think that would be a problem. There was a series of prose poems called 'Khan•Cycle', a collection of ancient legends about Al Khan. Rolan referenced it heavily when he wrote the 'Sorcerer of Melgalius'..." Sistine explained, "It was said that Al Khan received two blades from 'Lady Midnight' - Sou•Lter for his right hand, and Wi•Zayer for his left hand. In other words, if he did not use the correct hand, the special powers will not manifest... or so the legend goes."

"In simpler words?"

"He won't be able to switch his swords mid-combat. As long as teacher and Riel keep him occupied on each side, the formation should work to our advantage!"



"...!"

"Hahaha! Are you feeling irked? Not sure of how to deal with the

situation? Hey!" Glenn taunted the wraith as he threw a jab.

As the fight progressed, the only blade to ever face Glenn in combat was the right one, with the left one occupied by Riel. Their excellent teamwork made the wraith stuck dealing with the awkward situation, where the only way to break their onslaught was if he switch the two blades.

"Why aren't you switching the blades?! Hahaha? Switch them, I dare you!!"

"..."

The originally calm wraith has begun to show signs of displeasure, but it continued to keep the blades in their original hand. The result was a clear victory for Sistine, the ancient civilization otaku.

Still, our attacks are still being shrugged off...! Darn it!

Despite their tireless combination attacks, the two could only grit their teeth.

"..."

Even when facing against Glenn's and Riel's torrent of strikes, the wraith was able to parry all incoming strikes, including the heavy sword blows from Riel, with laughable ease. Soon, from a tiny crack in the teamwork, so small that it could not even count as a real crack, the wraith took the advantage and kicked Glenn aside, then punted Riel away with the pommel of his blade.

"Gah?!"

"Uwaaa!"

The two flew for some distance, before landing on the ground with a thud.

Darn it, we were too focused on his sword, and forgot that he have other methods of attack available to him!

However, such an outcome was unavoidable. If they still took to mind its other possible attacks, they would have not been able to

deal with the blades.

Cough... "What power... Isn't that just cheating?!"

"I-It hurts... Ugh..."

An incredibly heavy blow. Despite already having strengthened their defense with White Magic [Body•Up], the blow still dealt heavy damage to them, and they felt as if their body had been shattered to pieces.

The wraith did not let this great opportunity slip away, with its eyes locked on to the problematic Riel, instantly shortened its distance for an attack. At that moment,

"Ferocious thunder emperor, pay heed•Brilliant lance of light•Pierce...! Pierce! Pierce!" three streaks of bolt shot out from above the wraith. It was the Black Magic [Lightning•Pierce], a spell casted by Sistine, who stood atop a tall platform in the back.

To better assist Glenn and Riel, Sistine modified [Physical•Boost]'s effect. At the cost of the increased stamina and strength, she greatly improved her kinetic vision and response time. With Lumia's hand in hers to amplify her magic power, the bolts were as potent as they could possibly be, shot at the most opportune time. Due to their incredibly dense energy, the surrounding air was instantly ionized, creating streams of blue plasma in their wake.

"Child's play!"

The wraith leapt back to dodge the first bolt, and then with an elegant swing of its left blade, nullified the second and third.

In the midst of its defense,

"Teacher! Riel! Gentle angel•Give onto them•Your bountiful light!" Lumia loudly chanted with both her hands raised.

It was the long distance healing spell, White Magic [Life•Wave], known to be a high level healing spell. The healing wave washed over the body of Glenn and Riel.

"Thank you, I feel much better now!"

"Mm. I'm good."

With their pain cleansed, the two leapt back into combat,

"Yaah!!"

"Hiyaa!!"

...And swiftly reengaged the wraith in combat, using their teamwork to pressure its defense.

However, their struggle seemed hollow, because...

"Hmph... Daws, thou has't some w'rth..." The wraith declared while receiving Glenn's blow.

Darn it! This bastard is enjoying the fight?

To be able to have the leisure to enjoy the fight, it meant that the wraith wasn't giving it his all.

It is completely slighting us...! But still, it doesn't hurt to end this battle while it continues to underestimate us.

Glenn's goal was to blitz through the battle as soon as possible. When facing against a stronger foe, magician must not needlessly prolong the combat. The longer the combat last, the lesser the prospect of victory, since prolonged combat rely more and more on their aggregate power.

'My opponent is weaker than me, and I even have four lives to count on'... I bet you are thinking like that...!

Glenn annoyingly hypothesized as he parried the heavy blow.

Let's see who gets the last laugh. I have the perfect plan to confidently erase three of those pesky lives...!

Glenn saw three openings in the wraith's words and actions.

"Riel!"

"Mm!"

"Huh?!"

Glenn and Riel suddenly switched positions, with Glenn now facing the left blade and Riel facing the right.

"Taste this!!"

As soon as they switched, Glenn pulled out his revolver at a point blank range where the blade could not reach.

"Thou wisheth!"

Crack! The pommel of the wraith smacked into Glenn's revolver and knocked the barrel aside.

"Tsk..."

Glenn leapt back to pull some distance and, with the revolver aimed at the wraith, pulled the trigger.

Tap! When the hammer hit the metal, no bullets flew out.

"Hahaha~"

Seeing the opportunity, the wraith turned to face Riel coming in from the other side with sword raised high. However, at that moment, Glenn swung his left hand forward, and manually pulled back the hammer on his revolver. In a sudden, three sharp bangs ran out.

Glenn's triple-shot. Using his right thumb, left thumb, and left pinky to pull back and release the hammer in quick succession, Glenn was able to shoot three shots in almost the same instant. All three bullets flew out toward the wraith's right blade, and with three times the force of a single bullet, struck and knocked the blade out of his hand.

"Wh-...?!"

"...And that's one life down." Glenn let out a devious smile.

"Hiyaa!"

Riel came down with her swift blow and cut deep into the wraith,

sending him flying.

That's right, you knew nothing of firearms... in spite of your lack of knowledge, you foolishly believed your false assumptions about its function.

The wraith believed firearms to be 'a magic tool that used explosive magic to propel pellets of metal'. If it was purely a mechanical tool, its magic nullification would have no effect. To that end, Glenn purposely skipped loading the first chamber, so that it would seem to not fire, and made the wraith falsely believe his magic nullification has sealed the revolver's function. It was a cheap trick that definitely won't work on any modern magicians. However, against the antiquated wraith, it was practically assured success. This was because the wraith lived in an era without firearms, an existence so ancient that its story was retold as legends.

"Tsk..."

Despite having had just suffered a deep wound, the wraith bolted toward his fallen blade at the first opportunity, planning to pick it up.

"As I expected, the moment the blade leaves your hand, you would do everything in your power to reclaim it. After all, it is the symbol of your prowess, and the centerpiece of your story! Just as the book foretold!" Glenn loudly shouted, "White Cat! As with our plan, go for it!"

Just moments before the wraith grabbed the blade...

"I know! *Rush forth, wind...!*"

Sistine's [Gale•Blow] pushed the blade further away.

"Ugh...?! Und'rhand'd Tricks..."

At that moment,

"Yaah!"

With sword in hand, Riel set upon the wraith like a rabid dog.

The wraith was off-balance from losing one of his two blades...

"Taste this!"

Glenn twisted his body, turned his revolver onto the wraith, and with it, a bang with a flash, then followed immediately by another bang. Glenn fired all the remaining bullets left in the revolver, and further disturbed the wraith's already unstable stance.

"...•*Guide their way!*" At that time, Lumia had finished her own chant that she started alongside Sistine. With a drop of holy oil that ignited into a cleansing flame, Lumia turned Sistine's [Gale•Blow] into a twister of flame.

The burning flame made the wraith disoriented. However, no one knew if exorcism had any effect on the wraith, and the whole purpose of the flame was to act as a diversion to buy some time. The real attack came from...

"Hiyaa!!"

With flames that obscured the wraith's vision, Riel charged in with sword in hand, parting the flame with her body. Robbed of his sight and balance, the wraith was unable to respond to the attack in time.

"؟!"

The wraith barely turned his body and tried to block Riel's sword with his blade. However, Riel's momentum could not be stopped, and easily blew through its hasty defenses, dealing another fatal blow and sending the wraith reeling into the air.

"And with that, two lives down."

What would be up next was relatively predictable. According to the book, once that fellow has lost a decent amount of his lives and has been cornered, it will turn to magic. As the legend explained, beyond its ability as an unmatched warrior, it was also a

powerful magician. Only that, compared to magic, Al Khan preferred his blades more.

"\$!@%..."

As expected, once it has stabilized itself and landed on the ground, it immediately began to chant the same unknown spell as before.

Above its head, a massive sun-like sphere began to form. If the legend held, it was a divine flame that could wipe out thousands in an instant.

Although I do not know what it is chanting, if there is a chant, it must be 'magic'!

If it was magic, then...

"I won't let you...!!"

This time, Glenn unhesitantly pulled out his 'Fool' tarot card, and activated the card along with tightly packed runes written in blood on its surface. With it, Original Magic [The Fool's World] enveloped the field.

Because of an earlier hesitation, Glenn didn't reveal his card, and thought it was quite the relief. After all, the wraith couldn't imagine Glenn held a secret weapon that 'sealed off activation of all magic'.

Now, whether my [The Fool's World] will take effect on that fellow's magic... Please, make it work!!

"...&\$@%. Wh-?!"

Glenn had won the gamble.

As its magic was sealed, the sun-like sphere slowly shrunk to nothingness. At the same time, Riel leapt at the wraith.

"Hiyaa!!"

Aiming at the bewildered wraith's left blade, Riel slashed

upwards.

"Gah?!"

However, the wraith was wary of Riel's attack, and did not let his remaining blade get knocked away. But now with his left blade tied up by Riel's attack, at that opening...

"...•*Brilliant lance of light*•*Pierce!* "

Sistine, who started her chant at the same moment as when Glenn activated [The Fool's World], shot out a bolt of [Lightning•Pierce]. Once again, the bolt was augmented by Lumia's ability, and left a streak of blue behind.

"Ugh!"

The bolt perfectly pierced the left chest of the wraith, who was looking back at Riel.

With Glenn sealing its magic, Riel buying the necessary time, and Sistine launching the final attack with the assistance of Lumia, the almost scripted progression made Glenn irresistibly laugh.

"...And, that's the third?"

"Ugh...! Bastard, what didst thee just doth?!" With sparks still coming off his body, the wraith angrily demanded.

"Sorry about that. To be honest, I have a 'long distance spell that specifically seals the magic of an individual'... I can't have you start cheating now, can I?" Glenn threw out a big lie.

As far as Original Magic [The Fool's World] was concerned, it wasn't a really useful spell, since it 'sealed all magic around the vicinity of its caster'. In short, both Glenn's and Riel's magic were now sealed. Sistine was only able to use magic because she stood on a platform high above Glenn, outside of [The Fool's World]'s effective range. To put Sistine outside the effective range, Glenn had to make emergency modifications to the spell with runes of blood in order to flatten the spell's coverage. Therefore, Glenn and

the others purposely selected a battlefield that was difficult for the wraith to tower above them. In short, everything was going as they had planned in the field they prepared.

"Impressive, f'r thou daws to achieveth such most wondrous leaps."

And with it, Glenn managed to fool the wraith regarding the truth behind [The Fool's World]. With its own magic sealed, and was robbed of a third life by Sistine's magic, the wraith did not doubt Glenn's lie.

This way, even if Sistine and the others continued to use spells, it would not seek to use its own in return, regardless of whether it stood outside the effective range of [The Fool's World]. They had wonderfully achieved their goal: to not allow the wraith to use magic.

In the legend, Al Khan's sun-like spell was able to erase an army of tens of thousands in the blink of an eye. With everything else in the legend already confirmed true, then there was no reason to doubt the validity of the spell's strength. If he managed to complete his single phrase chant, there would be nothing Glenn and the others could do to defend against the ensuing annihilation.

"With that, are you on your last? How are you feeling now, o' great one~?"

Wrapping up the combat before the opponents could display their full might, such was the essence for the weak to triumph over the strong.

"...V'ry good. I now recognizeth thee lot as w'rthy foes." The atmosphere around the wraith changed.

It has reined in some of its original leisurely attitude. Although it has never underestimate Glenn and the others, it should now have come to recognize that its life was on the line, and what stood before it were incredibly strong foes.

In a few short minutes since the start of the battle, Glenn had tilted the favors to his advantage.

"...Sistine, Lumia, and Riel, next up will be the hard part. Shall we?"

The girls all nodded their heads.

"Let's do this...!"

"Yaah!!"

Glenn and Riel charged directly at the wraith head on. Vis-à-vis, the final death match between them has begun.

The wraith was a terribly strong enemy, but the current situation greatly favored Glenn and the others. Not only had the wraith lost its right sword, had its magic sealed, and had wasted a large amount of mana, the only blade left to the wraith was the Wi•Zayer. Under normal circumstances, the blade was not a threat to Glenn and the others. Additionally, Glenn and the others did not endure any crippling injuries in the fight thus far, as well as having the advantage in terrain. Finally, Glenn and the others had already shaved off three of his lives, leaving just the last one remaining.

We can win, we can do it!

Such thoughts were completely reasonable.

Not only Glenn, any modern magician in his shoes would definitely be confident in their victory.

However, the anti-hero of legends, myths, and fables always had the strength to back up its fame. Glenn and the others would soon come to realize that one simple but painful fact, through 'pain'.



"...Hmm?" Celica awoke to the sound of battle below.

"W-where am... I?"

Celica laid on what seemed to be a terrace, immediate above she could see the hemispherical roof.

"Uwaaa?!"

"Teacher?!"

She could hear painful shouts from below.

W-what exactly is happening...?

Celica dragged her heavy body forward, pulling on the railing of the terrace, and wobbly stood up. Looking down below, she could see a few platforms connected by a complicated system of stairs.

"...?!"

What entered Celica's sight was a dismayed Glenn.

After having quickly shaved away three of its lives and growing confident in their eventual victory, Glenn and the others continued with no end in sight. The battle felt like it had been raging on for a long time, but at the same time, felt like only a few minutes had passed. One thing was for sure, Glenn and the others were being forced into a corner.

"To keepeth up with me to such an extent. Thou lot shouldst beest proud."

The wraith remained alive, unflinchingly standing before them.

"Tsk...?!"

On the other hand, Glenn was kneeling on the ground, his clothes in tatters. Although there were no fatal wounds, his body was littered with injuries.

"Ugh..."

The brave Riel was also covered with injuries, and had recently lost consciousness. She laid there on the ground with her sword nearby.

Lumia also could not keep up her healing, and the effect had long been diminished for they had long passed their healing limits.

Cough... cough... "T-this guy is way too much of a cheat...!"

"Haa... Haa... Haa..."

Behind Glenn, Lumia and Sistine had already shown symptoms of mana insufficiency, and would risk death if they keep on using magic.

D-darn it... I-it's too strong...!!

Glenn wiped away the blood and sweat that had obscured his vision, and slowly stood up with a wobble. He had already done quite well against the legendary wraith.

All that remained was one more life, just one life that stood in their way to victory. Yet, this last life was making them feel more and more hopeless. The strength and skill of the wraith long stood above Glenn and the others.

Haa... T-that's right! The book had said that this fellow would become extremely strong when cornered. Darn it!

Within the 'Sorcerer of Melgalius', a certain king used a stratagem to seal up Al Khan and took away his blade, Sou•Lter. Under such circumstances, every reader thought that Al Khan was sure to lose. However, Al Khan fought with the thousand elites of the king for three days and three nights, using just a single blade in his left hand. Ultimately, he managed to wipe out all of the elites and even kill the king himself. Glenn and the others were precisely reliving the tale.

As the legend went, Al Khan was blessed by Lady Midnight, so when he was cornered, fortune would always smile upon him. The only ones who could defeat him was someone with an even greater 'fate' than him, the Demon Lord.

Seriously, aren't you being too faithful to the depiction...?

As it stood, the wraith just slowly and calmly repulsed each and every one of Glenn's attacks. Now, the tables were turned on Glenn and the others. What's worse...

"...I see, I wast almost fool'd by thee daws."

The wraith suddenly seemed to have noticed something, and leapt into the air to pull some distance between itself and Glenn, then landing on a nearby platform.

"...?!"

The wraith now stood far above, outside [The Fool's World]'s effective range.

"Hmph... Thy visage betrays thee, daws... As I expect'd."

D-darn it!

Glenn gritted his teeth in frustration. His lie about the nature of his magic had given way.

It can't be avoided... After all, while White Cat and Lumia chanted as many spells as they'd liked, Riel and I didn't chant any spell no matter how good the opportunity. It was bound to be discovered sooner or later...

The original hope was to end this fight before it had noticed, but hope has betrayed them. Under the gaze of despair from Glenn and the others, the wraith confidently declared.

"...I commend thee f'r thy trickery and lies that hadst fool'd me f'r so longeth. Although thou art m're daws, thou has't the hearts of a warri'r. As a reward, I shalt alloweth thee lot to die without pain."

The wraith began to chant. Above his head, the burning sphere appeared for the third time. As it quickly gathered power, Glenn and the others knew the devastating power if it were to be completed - the might to wipe out armies, and with it, not even their ashes would remain. With all their power exhausted, Sistine and Lumia could only meekly wait for the end to come.

"Begone!" Before long, the wraith completed his spell and declared.

"Darn it! I won't let you!!" Glenn forced himself up and rushed the wraith despite knowing he won't be able to stop it in time.

"Know thy limit! Shame not thy death, daws!"

From the wraith's left hand, a whip-like object flew out, and attached to the whip was its blade. The blade aimed straight at Glenn roared like a cannon as it cut through the air.

"Wh-?!" Glenn was unable to dodge the incoming blade.

"Teacher?!"

"Nooo!!"

The girls' shout echoed through the ruined patio.

Glenn!!

At that instant, Celica, who was watching the battle from high above, calmly took out an object. It was an extremely old pocket watch - the magic tool [La•Tilica], Celica's last real trump card. With her eyes on the combat, she reflexively activated the hidden mechanism within...

"Stop, Celica."

"!!"

Suddenly, before her very eyes, the landscape had completely changed. When she came to her senses, she was no longer in the Underground Labyrinth, but a familiar field. The madder red, the parched air, and the scorched wasteland stretching all the way to the horizon. It was a world filled with death, where even time stood still...

How could Celica forget? She was at the place four hundred year ago where she first awakened. The place where everything began.

"That's not correct, Celica. This is your spirit world." Before Celica's eyes was a girl with unnatural wings.

"Here lies within the boundary between dream and reality, the space between the conscious and the subconscious. This was the land you had built, a reflection from the deepest recess of your

soul. Therefore, time flows differently in here than it does in the real world, where days spent in this world are but mere moments."

"...Who are you? Lumia Tingel...? No, you are not..." Celica unhesitantly questioned the one who looked like Lumia.

"I am... Namenlose."

"Namenlose? Ah, were you the one who rescued Glenn and the others? Hahaha, thanks for watching over them in my absence." Celica gave an exaggerated bow and then smiled. "Speaking of which, why did you summon me to this world? Even if the time flowed much slower here, I still can't leave them in danger."

"Don't use that magic, Celica." Namenlose calmly warned Celica, "You should just escape, even if you are the only one to survive."

Her grim statement seemed to have a hint of sincerity within.

"Behind you there is a path that leads up to the next level. If you take that path, I will try my best to help you. Even with the meager power that remains, I will do my best..."

"I refuse." Celica instantly responded.

"...W-what are you saying? Are you not aware of the current circumstances?"

"Mm. My soul... or rather, my aether body was crippled by that strange blade."

"Then... you should be very well aware what will happen if you were to activate that spell."

"Yes, the aftermath will not be pretty. Given how severe the damage my aether body had sustained." Celica toyed with the pocket watch in her hand as she calmly analyzed her choices, "Likely... I won't ever be able to use magic again."

"If you understand that much, then...!" Namenlose frustratingly shouted.

"However, at the cost of my magic, I would be able to save Glenn's life. You can't get a better bargain than that..." Celica coolly responded, to which Namenlose had no reply.

"Y-you... will definitely come to regret your decision..."

"...That I am quite certain. To lose all my accumulated efforts over hundreds of years, no sane person would not have any regrets... After all, I am no saint." Yet, contrary to her statement, Celica's face was serene.

"What then of your mission? The mission that you valued above everything else. Without your magic, how will you complete your mission?"

"Although I should probably ask why you know about my mission, none of that matters now." Celica let out a carefree retort, "The answer is simple. There is something more important than my magic, my mission, and my regrets."

"What...?" Namenlose furrowed her eyebrows, "Let me say it clearly. You only came to this absurd decision because you do not remember the mission. Your mission defined who you are, and was everything to you..."

"...Hard to argue against you on it, since I did have the same feeling."

The feeling was why Celica relentlessly pursued it for the past hundreds of years.

To have wasted four hundred years... Really, how laughable.

"Even if you cannot remember your mission at the moment, you certainly will one day, and you will be compelled to complete it. If you cannot use your magic, what will you do then? Without your magic, there will be no way for you to finish your mission... I can't say too much, but you..."

"Not to worry. What I really want is to live with that person... in the present. Because..." Celica smiled, a completely innocent and

radiant smile, "...we are family."

"?!"

"As you said, I still could not remember my mission. It was definitely a mission close to my heart, but..."

"..."

"I love Glenn. I love him who accepted me as family. If it is for his sake, the one who brought me out from my shell and cured me of my eternal loneliness, I..."

Namenlose remained silent before Celica, who spoke as if she had attained enlightenment.

"Seriously, why do I even bother? You are as willful as ever..."
Namenlose let out a sigh in resignation, "Then there is nothing else for me to say. The very least I could do is to share my remaining power with you, and I wish you happiness and bliss in the dark days ahead."

Namenlose used her thin fingers to draw a mysterious symbol in the air, "Let me, the world's most tainted being, give you, the world's most hated being, my blessings."

With Namenlose's words, Celica felt a certain something flow into her heart - a faint but significant surge of power.

"Thanks. How to say this... Although this was our first meeting, I feel an odd sense of familiarity with you. Have we met before I lost my memories?"

"...You will know in due time, Heavens (Celica)."

"Mm. I share that feeling. Till we meet again, Nameless (Namenlose)."

At that point, Celica's vision began to turn blurry, and the world was dyed with white.



"Original Magic [My World] Activate!"

Now back in reality, Celica flipped open the pocket watch [La•Tilica]. In that moment, time stopped, and the world lost its luster. Glenn, the wraith, Sistine, Lumia... Everyone simply froze like statues. Even the sun and the blade that was inches away from Glenn's neck all stopped where they were, floating in midair. In this gray landscape, only Celica alone could still move.

This was the spell that pushed Celica to the pedestal of the continent's strongest, and was the seventh-ranked Celica's greatest creation. Original Magic [My World] was a magic that paused the flow of time, and only Celica alone could move freely while it is frozen, a literal 'world' of hers. With this power, Celica decided it is time to end this farce.

Hey... Glenn...

"...Five."

As Celica counted out loud, she leapt from the terrace.

Even now... I still think it was a blessing for me to have met you...

"...Four."

The moment she landed on the platform below, she bolted forward like an arrow in flight, passed the frozen Sistine and Lumia, and vaulted across the railing.

...Mm. Actually, I had always know that... we were family... that I am no longer alone...

"...Three."

Celica continued to dash forward as she reminisced about the time spent together with Glenn. Zooming past the unconscious Riel, Celica swooped up her mithril sword.

...The days I had spent with you gave the immortal me courage. The days I had watched your optimistic figure gave the immortal me confidence.

Passing through the field, Celica went straight up the stairs leading to the wraith. Her body had already exceeded its limit, and cried out in agony.

I have been pampered too much, and had grown fearful of these wonderful days ending, fearful of returning to my old days of loneliness. I wanted to stay by your side forever... But, I think the time has come for me to let you go.

Yet, despite her body's terrible pains, Celica's heart was unusually warm.

...Everyone have to walk down their own paths, but walking down their own path doesn't mean that it would be a lonely journey. Only because we are not alone, we could courageously walk down our own path. It is the same for everyone...

Celica continued to run up the stairs, her body enveloped with blissfulness and courage.

...You need not worry about me anymore. I had already been saved, and had obtained irreplaceable treasures from you.

"...Two."

Finally, Celica passed Glenn on the stairs, himself frozen in time.

Therefore, this time, please let me be the one to save you... no matter the cost!

"...One."

With all her strength, Celica smacked the blade inches away from Glenn's neck. With time stopped, the blade remained still and didn't even make a sound.

Celica then continued her sprint, with her sword pointed at the wraith.

...Hahaha. 'Regret'... Although I needlessly said it earlier...

Using the last ounce of her strength, with blood blowing out with every breath and wobbling steps, Celica closed the distance

between her and the wraith.

I probably...

"...Zero!"

As Celica thrust out the sword in her hand, the tip of the blade regained its lost luster.

...will never come to regret the decision I've made on this day.



"Wh-?!"

Glenn did not know what happened at the moment. The blade inches away from his throat was knocked away with a sharp sound.

"...Zero!"

Stab.

At the end of the stairs, Celica suddenly appeared and skewered the wraith in its chest with her sword.

"Haa... Haa...!" The completely exhausted Celica fell onto the ground, "Haa... Haa... Mm. I won't ever regret this decision."

With her eyes slowly shut, Celica's face revealed a blissful smile as she muttered to herself.

"The fourth... Guh... To bethink..."

Pierced with the sword, the wraith took a few steps back, black gas spewed out from his body.

"Although mine body is just a shadow, I didn't bethink daws to harm me so."

Despite being insulted, Glenn had no interest in its banters.

"As I hadst expect'd. Heavens (Celica)... Thou art a worthy one to be mine master."

"Forget it. I have no interest in taking in a problematic servant like

you, go find a master in someone else."

Despite Celica's snub, the wraith was euphoric, and then turned its eyes onto Glenn and the others.

"Although the final blow belonged to Heavens, foolish humans, wond'rfully done! Thou hadst achiev'd a splendid victory, f'r which, thou has't mine respect!"

The wraith then raised both his arms into the air, and with a final burst of black gas, it disappeared into the air.

"Till next time! O' powerful daws! I shalt wait f'r thee at the other end of the 'door'..."

With a mysterious gust of wind, all traces of the wraith were cleansed from the place. Even the pair of blades was nowhere to be found.

Calm once again descended upon the patio.

"Is it... over?"

"So it seems..."

The anti-climactic end to the battle made Glenn unsure of how to respond, to which Celica gave the clear answer.

"Haa... Although I am not exactly sure what had transpired, but it seemed like we were saved..." Glenn let out a deep sigh.

At that moment, Celica slowly fell toward the stairs.

"Celica?!"

Glenn hurriedly ran up and caught her in his arms.

"Hey! Wake up, Celica! Are you alright?!"

"Haa... I should be fine, at the very least, I won't die." The enervated Celica just passively lay in Glenn's arms, "Although, I do feel... somewhat tired."

Celica tilted her head into Glenn,

"...Sorry. Just let me... stay like this for a bit..."

"Hey... Hey?"

Celica lost her consciousness in the arms of the flustered Glenn, and slowly descended into a deep slumber, her arm drooped down motionlessly. However, unlike the distressed Glenn, Celica's face revealed an innocent smile, seemingly in bliss.



Epilogue: Her Place

Under the setting sun, the rolling hills were dyed with bright red. Glenn and the others were on their carriage, slowly making their way back to Fejite.

"...Seriously, that was dangerous."

"Mm. For a second there, I wasn't sure how it would end up."

Sitting near the window of the carriage, Lumia and Sistine reminisced about the journey.

"I'm glad that everyone got back safely..."

"...Ruins exploration is known to be dangerous, but usually nothing like what we encountered. Next time, I hope to pick safer ruins to investigate instead..."

Lumia gently rubbed Riel's head, who was sleeping on her lap, while Sistine let out a long sigh. Around them sat Kash, Gibul, Cecil, Wendy, and Teresa, all seemed utterly exhausted, and slept sitting in their seats. The five students all believed in their return, and waited at the camp for an entire day. Lumia rejoiced about being able to meet with everyone again.

"Mm... More importantly..." Sistine puffed up her cheeks in anger.

She had been sneaking peeks at the driver's seat, for which, Lumia let out a wry smile.

"What now? Sistine, could you possibly be... jealous?"

"Wh-?!"

Sistine responded explosively to Lumia's accusation, and fervently tried to hide her embarrassment.

"W-who is jealous?! I-I am only..."

"Mm... I understand what Sistine is feeling, but I think it is better to leave them alone for now... Alright?"

"Y-you are definitely mistaken about something! Seriously! I'm tired! Going to sleep now!" Sistine angrily slammed against the back of her seat and closed her eyes. The loud noise seemed to wake Riel up.

"...?"

Riel looked around with her sleepy eyes, and then fell back onto Lumia's lap.

"Mm..."

"Hehehe..." Lumia let out a small chuckle while looking at her friends.



On the driver's seat, at the boundary of the rising darkness and the setting sun.

Glenn and Celica sat next to one another as the carriage travelled on the road surrounded by a golden field of grass.

"..."

"..."

Glenn held the reins, while Celica sat with both hands around her legs, and her head resting on Glenn's shoulder. The two just silently sat on the gently rocking carriage, with the brisk afternoon breeze blowing in their faces.

The atmosphere was a pleasant one. They sat at peace, with no need for words to communicate their feeling. Even without Celica's magic, the time seemed to stand still for the two.

"...Hey, Glenn." Celica said in an almost dreamlike trance.

"What is it?"

"...Nothing."

"...Seriously?"

Glenn let out a troubled sigh, while Celica meekly chuckled.

"Still, you seemed to be holding up quite well."

"No way, I was really pushing myself back then..." Celica calmly responded.

"Umm... That... Are you really no longer able to use magic?" Glenn somewhat hesitantly asked.

Glenn had learned the details of what transpired after everything had ended. Having performed such a large spell despite the crippling damage to her astral body, Celica likely had pushed her astral body beyond repair, likely never be able to use magic ever again.

Glenn asked the question fully braced for the worst possible answer, but...

"Hmm... Perhaps not completely... I am quite surprised at the realization myself." Celica closed her eyes, and replied after confirming the condition of her own body, "Although I will probably need to undergo various treatments for a long time to come, I should still be able to use magic..."

"...Really? You aren't just fooling me?"

"Yes, it is a miracle. On top of my own luck, it was all thanks to a certain nosy individual."

Celica's cryptic response made Glenn tilt his head in confusion.

"Regardless of treatment, I doubt I will be able to use magic as willfully as I had done in the past. If anything, in the future, I will be dealing with numerous restrictions and limits to when I use magic."

"Is that so..." Glenn meekly drooped his shoulders.

Although they managed to avert the worst scenario, Glenn

nevertheless felt down at Celica's injury.

"Are you feeling guilty about what happened?"

"Yes... If I didn't permit you to join our expedition, none of this would hap-..."

"You dummy. All that happened to me this time was my own fault."

Tap. Celica butted Glenn with her head that rested on his shoulder.

"That and, if I had continued to challenge the Underground Labyrinth, I definitely would have met the wraith sooner or later. At that time, I would be alone facing off against him. In a certain way, you had rescued my life."

"..."

Glenn paused for a moment, and then turned to Celica.

"Hey... Are you really planning to continue your hunt for the mission you forgot? To continue challenging that Underground Labyrinth and uncover the secret to your immortality?"

Inside Glenn's mind, he recalled his final conversation with Namenlose before they departed from the Underground Labyrinth.



After they had managed to barely defeat the wraith, Glenn and the others once again followed Namenlose. Soon, they were brought to a large room with a familiar stone tablet at the center of the room. According to Namenlose, these control panels were littered throughout the Underground Labyrinth.

Under Lumia's assistance, Glenn followed Namenlose's instruction and operated the control panel, once again created a portal in midair - one that led to the Taum Observatory's planetarium chamber.

Ah... We are finally heading home.

Sistine, Lumia, and Riel all passed through the door with relief. Glenn, with the sleeping Celica on his back, was the last to proceed through the door.

"...I have something to tell you, Glenn."

Namenlose whispered to Glenn just before he stepped into the portal.

"What is it? The door will close if we don't hurry."

"Do not worry, we have the time. Just listen to me, it is important."

Glenn could not help but pause his footstep and listen to Namenlose.

"Glenn, in the near future, you will need to go with Celica to the Taum Observatory once more."

"Huh? Are you joking? Who would ever want to return to that lousy place? I won't go even if I am dragged there in the future..."

Namenlose ignored Glenn's outburst, and continued.

"And then, you will be met with an important decision... a choice between things irreplaceable to you."

"...Are you a fortuneteller or something?" Glenn let out a long sigh.

"Namenlose, I am very grateful for all the help you rendered in our escape, despite you being a complete mystery. Not to mention, despite looking identical to Lumia, you are incredibly arrogant, making it difficult for anyone to like you. You are also not very talkative, and all you say are such distasteful things... In spite of all these faults, I am very grateful to you..." Glenn continued, "An honest advice, it may be better to be silent than to constantly saying nonsense..."

Namenlose once again just brushed off Glenn's insults, and only gave a stern warning.

"If you wish to avoid the future I speak, do not let her remember."

"Ah? What? Who is 'her' that you are talking about? Is it Celica? Or..."

Before Glenn noticed, Namenlose had vanished.



"Personally, I wish you won't do something as dangerous as that." Glenn asked, while trying to purge the conversation with Namenlose from his mind.

Despite all that had happened, and despite losing her magic, Celica might continue to seek her lost identity and mission. Although Glenn had no intention of believing in Namenlose's hogwash, he nevertheless felt uneasy. However, Celica's answer cleansed Glenn of all worries...

"...I won't." Celica clearly answered, "I have already given up on my old identity. Not to mention, with the condition my body is in, all that is just a pipe dream anyways."

"Celica...?"

"That and, I no longer have a need to seek it anymore. With a family that cherish and support me, why won't I be satisfied?"

Celica revealed a charming smile.

"Ah, yes, that is true..."

"That and, I can't let my beloved family member get worried~"

"Tsk... S-so you finally came around... honestly..." Glenn turned his face away in embarrassment, with his ear revealing a tinge of red.

"Ah, though I should say, if you were to marry someone in the future and leave the house, mommy will get lonely. Even if only occasionally, you should come home from time to time to visit. If mommy gets too lonely, mommy may end up being tempted back into the Underground Labyrinth to search for the meaning of life~"

"Listen to what you are saying!"

Celica teased Glenn as usual, and let out a hearty smile...

"Hey, Glenn..."

"...What is it?"

"Thank you..."

"Not sure what you mean..."

After that, they said nothing more to each other. With the gentle wind blowing, the two just huddled next to one another as the sun slowly disappeared below the hills.

With the illusionary castle hanging high above, the group travelled on the road to Fejite, in blissful silence.





Afterword

Hello, Taro Hitsuji here.

Now that Roku de Nashi Majutsu Koushi to Kinki Kyouten's sixth volume has officially been released, I would like to take this opportunity to thank my editors and everyone in the publishing company, as well as all the readers who had faithfully supported the releases. Thank you all for your continued support!

Sixth Volume. We have gone a long way since the series started.

As shown by the cover, the sixth volume's focus was on Celica, just like part of the Memory Records of Bastard Magic Instructor.

Now, with the main story, we have finally cast the spotlight on Celica, who have a large role in the main story. In a way, this volume could be said to be a turning point, as all the pieces had finally came together for the journey ahead.

Who was Lumia? What was wrong with the imperial bloodline? Who were the Researchers of Divine Wisdom? What was the Akashic Records? What were the ancients? Who was Celica? As all these questions slowly get answered one after another, the larger picture slowly comes to be... I hope that readers will continue to follow the development.

Therefore, please take care of me in the future.

On other notes, I recently thought...

Was the White Haired Records really like this? (Rolls Eyes)

R-really strange how it came to be like this. At the beginning, when I first submitted my draft, I only thought about writing a story about a lazy teacher surrounded by a bunch of cute girls, and

then would occasionally pull off something grand and make the girls go "Kyaa♥!! Sensei!!". Things about sky castle, about akashic records, about conspiracies, about ancient civilizations, none of these chuuni-esque elements were in the original draft!

"If I keep on writing like this, I doubt the story will last long, and the publishing house really wanted to serialize the story."

I recalled when the White Haired Records released its first volume, my editor asked me how I would proceed on with the story...

Only then, did I hesitantly reopen the 'Book of dark past' that I vowed never would see the light of day again... (Pukes blood)

Taro Hitsuji



Illustrator's Afterword

With Glenn's messy hair, how could anyone recognize him if I don't include a ponytail?

Λ Λ

(*—Δ—) Kurone Mishima



Translator's Afterword

Huapollon here~

I am taking this section hostage for my own purposes.

I can't believe it took me half a year to get everything finally translated, but here you go, with all the pretty redraws I could

muster solo.

My interest in this series largely came as a result of the anime, as found the story to be engaging. (But mostly it was because, as I came to realize in the recent months, the platinum-haired MC...) Seeing the project was abandoned by all groups involved back in March, I decided to carry on the torch and translate the LN into English.

And then came the choice. Should I start from the beginning to ensure consistency? Pick up from where the torch was dropped? Or start from wherever I decide most fitting?

After weighing my options, I have come to three realizations:

1. I felt there was no need to retranslate Vol 1 already done by another group and,

2. The safest spot to pick up the series was Vol 3, since the previous group left it undone mid-Vol 2, but that would mean I had to pick up on Riel's Arc. (And let's be honest here, Riel's Arc in Vol 3 and 4 was a bore. You can agree to disagree ;p) Which means...

3. People will be wondering what happened after the anime series is over, and finding the anime series a good summary of the early volume, I could always pick it up from where the anime left off.

After some contemplation, I decided to begin my translation from ~~Vol 5~~ Vol 6 after counting the remaining episodes in the cour and made my best estimate to where the anime will end. (My own fault mostly, I didn't think the anime would reach Vol 5, and thought it was going to wrap up at the end of Vol 4. So two chapters in, and lo and behold, the anime hits Vol 5's Sistine's arc, so... in adherence with my belief, I put that on hold and started Vol 6.)

Long story short, 6 months later and I finally bring you Vol 6 of RokuAka.

As for where to go from here, I will definitely begin my translations from the first volume of Side Stories, since there are 2 stories that I find interesting to bring to the English audience. After the 1st Side Stories Volume, I will then push forward to Vol 7, and then 8, and then the 2nd Side Stories Volume, and finally, Vol 9. What about the half-done Vol 5, you ask? Well, you already got the spoilers, so I am in no hurry to see it done ;p.

Once again, my goal is quality, because if I am going to commit to something, it better be archive quality.

Thank you for reading my translations,

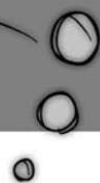
Huapollon, signing off.

p.s. Do you love Ye Olde English? I know I sure do~

ATOYAKI



//



髪を下ろした
グレン君。
あのしっぽが
無いと誰だか
わからない!!



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Credits

Roku de Nashi Majutsu Koushi to Kinki Kyouten: Volume 6

by Taro Hitsuji

illustration by Kurone Mishima

Translated by Huapollon

Edited and Ebook Compiled by Huapollon

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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